Weird Tales

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By ROBERT E. HOWARD

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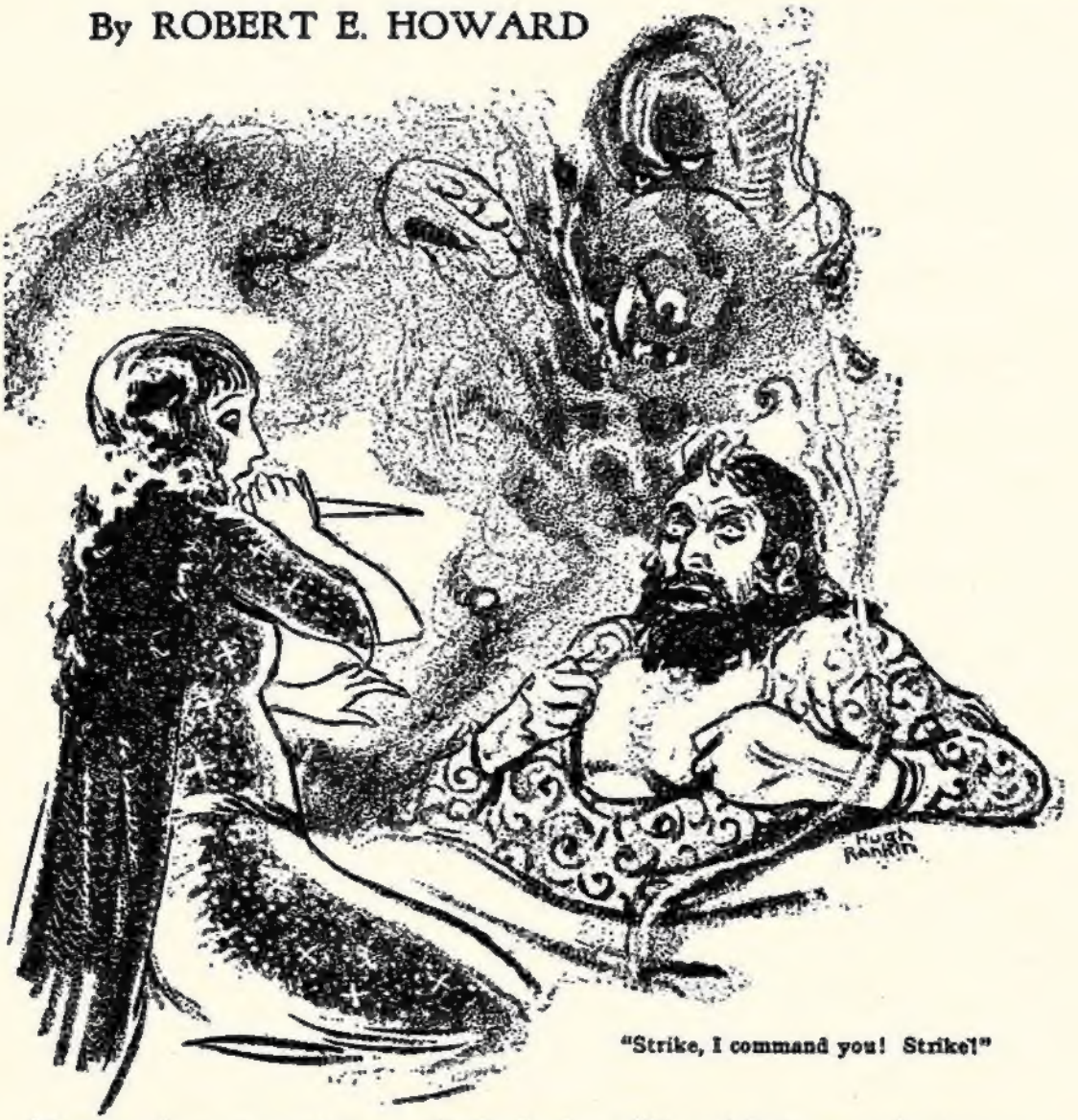
WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The People of the Black Circle

By ROBERT E. HOWARD



"Strike, I command you! Strike!"

A stupendous story of Conan the barbarian soldier of fortune, and a tremendous adventure in the castle of the Black Seers

1. Death Strikes a King

THE king of Vendhya was dying. Through the hot, stifling night the temple gongs boomed and the conchs roared. Their clamor was a faint echo in the gold-domed chamber where Bunda Chand struggled on the velvet-cushioned dais. Beads of sweat glistened on his dark skin; his fingers twisted the gold-worked fabric beneath him. He was

young; no spear had touched him, no poison lurked in his wine. But his veins stood out like blue cords on his temples, and his eyes dilated with the nearness of death. Trembling slave-girls knelt at the foot of the dais, and leaning down to him, watching him with passionate intensity, was his sister, the Devi Yasmina. With her was the *wazam,* a noble grown old in the royal court.

She threw up her head in a gusty gesture of wrath and despair as the thunder of the distant drums reached her ears.

"The priests and their clamor!" she exclaimed. "They are no wiser than the leeches who are helpless! Nay, he dies and none can say why. He is dying now —and I stand here helpless, who would burn the whole city and spill the blood of thousands to save him."

"Not a man of Ayodhya but would die in his place, if it might be, Devi," answered the *wazam.* "This poison——"

"I tell you it is not poison!" she cried. "Since his birth he has been guarded so closely that the cleverest poisoners of the East could not reach him. Five skulls bleaching on the Tower of the Kites can testify to attempts which were made—and which failed. As you well know, there are ten men and ten women whose sole duty is to taste his food and wine, and fifty armed warriors guard his chamber as they guard it now. No, it is not poison; it is sorcery—black, ghastly magic——"

She ceased as the king spoke; his livid lips did not move, and there was no recognition in his glassy eyes. But his voice rose in an eery call, indistinct and far away, as if he called to her from beyond vast, wind-blown gulfs.

"Yasmina! Yasmina! My sister, where are you? I can not find you. All is darkness, and the roaring of great winds!"

"Brother!" cried Yasmina, catching his limp hand in a convulsive grasp. "I am here! Do you not know me——"

Her voice died at the utter vacancy of his face. A low confused moaning waned from his mouth. The slave-girls at the foot of the dais whimpered with fear, and Yasmina beat her breast in her anguish.

● Robert E. Howard's spectacular and original hero, Conan the barbarian adventurer and fighting-man, has captured the fancy of our readers by his brilliant exploits and his utter humanness. He has seized the place in popular esteem that was formerly held by Mr. Howard's earlier heroes, Solomon Kane the English Puritan, and King Kull of the fabled land of Valusia. Rough, and at times uncouth, Conan is a primitive man, who will brave almost certain death against terrific odds to rescue a damsel in distress; yet he will just as quickly give her a resounding slap on the posterior or drop her into a cesspool if she displeases him. But rude though he is, he possesses a sort of primordial chivalry and an innate reverence for womanhood that make him wholly fascinating. Fighting, stabbing, dealing swift death in red combat, Conan is a truly striking and heroic figure. We are pleased to present him herewith for the first time in a novel-length story: "The People of the Black Circle."

IN ANOTHER part of the city a man stood in a latticed balcony overlooking a long street in which torches tossed luridly, smokily revealing upturned dark faces and the whites of gleaming eyes. A long-drawn wailing rose from the multitude.

The man shrugged his broad shoulders

and turned back into the arabesqued chamber. He was a tall man, compactly built, and richly clad.

"The king is not yet dead, but the dirge is sounded," he said to another man who sat cross-legged on a mat in a corner. This man was clad in a brown camel-hair robe and sandals, and a green turban was on his head. His expression was tranquil, his gaze impersonal.

"The people know he will never see another dawn," this man answered.

The first speaker favored him with a long, searching stare.

"What I can not understand," he said, "is why I have had to wait so long for your masters to strike. If they have slain the king now, why could they not have slain him months ago?"

"Even the arts you call sorcery are governed by cosmic laws," answered the man in the green turban. "The stars direct these actions, as in other affairs. Not even my masters can alter the stars. Not until the heavens were in the proper order could they perform this necromancy." With a long, stained finger-nail he mapped the constellations on the marble-tiled floor. "The slant of the moon presaged evil for the king of Vendhya; the stars are in turmoil, the Serpent in the House of the Elephant. During such juxtaposition, the invisible guardians are removed from the spirit of Bhunda Chand. A path is opened in the unseen realms, and once a point of contact was established, mighty powers were put in play along that path."

"Point of contact?" inquired the other. "Do you mean that lock of Bhunda Chand's hair?"

"Yes. All discarded portions of the human body still remain part of it, attached to it by intangible connections. The priests of Asura have a dim inkling of this truth, and so all nail-trimmings, hair and other waste products of the persons of the royal family are carefully reduced to ashes and the ashes hidden. But at the urgent entreaty of the princess of Khosala, who loved Bhunda Chand vainly, he gave her a lock of his long black hair as a token of remembrance. When my masters decided upon his doom, the lock, in its golden, jewel-crusted case, was stolen from under her pillow while she slept, and another substituted, so like the first that she never knew the difference. Then the genuine lock travelled by camel-caravan up the long, long road to Peshkhauri, thence up the Zhaibar Pass, until it reached the hands of those for whom it was intended."

"Only a lock of hair," murmured the nobleman.

"By which a soul is drawn from its body and across gulfs of echoing space," returned the man on the mat.

The nobleman studied him curiously.

"I do not know if you are a man or a demon, Khemsa," he said at last. "Few of us are what we seem. I, whom the Kshatriyas know as Kerim Shah, a prince from Iranistan, am no greater a masquerader than most men. They are all traitors in one way or another, and half of them know not whom they serve. There at least I have no doubts; for I serve King Yezdigerd of Turan."

"And I the Black Seers of Yimsha," said Khemsa; "and my masters are greater than yours, for they have accomplished by their arts what Yezdigerd could not with a hundred thousand swords."

OUTSIDE, the moan of the tortured thousands shuddered up to the stars which crusted the sweating Vendhyan night, and the conchs bellowed like oxen in pain.

In the gardens of the palace the torches glinted on polished helmets and curved

swords and gold-chased corselets. All the noble-born fighting-men of Ayodhya were gathered in the great palace or about it, and at each broad-arched gate and door fifty archers stood on guard, with bows in their hands. But Death stalked through the royal palace and none could stay his ghostly tread.

On the dais under the golden dome the king cried out again, racked by awful paroxysms. Again his voice came faintly and far away, and again the Devi bent to him, trembling with a fear that was darker than the terror of death.

"Yasmina!" Again that far, weirdly dreeing cry, from realms immeasurable. "Aid me! I am far from my mortal house! Wizards have drawn my soul through the wind-blown darkness. They seek to sap the silver cord that binds me to my dying body. They cluster around me; their hands are taloned, their eyes are red like flame burning in darkness. *Aie,* save me, my sister! Their fingers sear me like fire! They would slay my body and damn my soul! What is this they bring before me?—*Aie!*"

At the terror in his hopeless cry Yasmina screamed uncontrollably and threw herself bodily upon him in the abandon of her anguish. He was torn by a terrible convulsion; foam flew from his contorted lips and his writhing fingers left their marks on the girl's shoulders. But the glassy blankness passed from his eyes like smoke blown from a fire, and he looked up at his sister with recognition.

"Brother!" she sobbed. "Brother——"

"Swift!" he gasped, and his weakening voice was rational. "I know now what brings me to the pyre. I have been on a far journey and I understand. I have been ensorceled by the wizards of the Himelians. They drew my soul out of my body and far away, into a stone room. There they strove to break the silver cord of life, and thrust my soul into the body of a foul night-weird their sorcery summoned up from hell. Ah! I feel their pull upon me now! Your cry and the grip of your fingers brought me back, but I am going fast. My soul clings to my body, but its hold weakens. Quick—kill me, before they can trap my soul for ever!"

"I can not!" she wailed, smiting her naked breasts.

"Swiftly, I command you!" There was the old imperious note in his failing whisper. "You have never disobeyed me—obey my last command! Send my soul clean to Asura! Haste, lest you damn me to spend eternity as a filthy gaunt of darkness. Strike, I command you! *Strike!*"

Sobbing wildly, Yasmina plucked a jeweled dagger from her girdle and plunged it to the hilt in his breast. He stiffened and then went limp, a grim smile curving his dead lips. Yasmina hurled herself face-down on the rush-covered floor, beating the reeds with her clenched hands. Outside, the gongs and conchs brayed and thundered and the priests gashed themselves with copper knives.

2. *A Barbarian from the Hills*

CHUNDER SHAN, governor of Peshkhauri, laid down his golden pen and carefully scanned that which he had written on parchment that bore his official seal. He had ruled Peshkhauri so long only because he weighed his every word, spoken or written. Danger breeds caution, and only a wary man lives long in that wild country where the hot Vendhyan plains meet the crags of the Himelians. An hour's ride westward or northward and one crossed the border and was among the Hills where men lived by the law of the knife.

The governor was alone in his cham-

ber, seated at his ornately-carven table of inlaid ebony. Through the wide window, open for the coolness, he could see a square of the blue Himelian night, dotted with great white stars. An adjacent parapet was a shadowy line, and further crenelles and embrasures were barely hinted at in the dim starlight. The governor's fortress was strong, and situated outside the walls of the city it guarded. The breeze that stirred the tapestries on the wall brought faint noises from the streets of Peshkhauri—occasional snatches of wailing song, or the thrum of a cithern.

The governor read what he had written, slowly, with his open hand shading his eyes from the bronze butter-lamp, his lips moving. Absently, as he read, he heard the drum of horses' hoofs outside the barbican, the sharp staccato of the guards' challenge. He did not heed, intent upon his letter. It was addressed to the *wazam* of Vendhya, at the royal court of Ayodhya, and it stated, after the customary salutations:

"Let it be known to your excellency that I have faithfully carried out your excellency's instructions. The seven tribesmen are well guarded in their prison, and I have repeatedly sent word into the hills that their chief come in person to bargain for their release. But he has made no move, except to send word that unless they are freed he will burn Peshkhauri and cover his saddle with my hide, begging your excellency's indulgence. This he is quite capable of attempting, and I have tripled the numbers of the lance guards. The man is not a native of Ghulistan. I can not with certainty predict his next move. But since it is the wish of the Devi——"

He was out of his ivory chair and on his feet facing the arched door, all in one instant. He snatched at the curved sword lying in its ornate scabbard on the table, and then checked the movement.

It was a woman who had entered unannounced, a woman whose gossamer robes did not conceal the rich garments beneath any more than they concealed the suppleness and beauty of her tall, slender figure. A filmy veil fell below her breasts, supported by a flowing head-dress bound about with a triple gold braid and adorned with a golden crescent. Her dark eyes regarded the astonished governor over the veil, and then with an imperious gesture of her white hand, she uncovered her face.

"Devi!" The governor dropped to his knee before her, his surprize and confusion somewhat spoiling the stateliness of his obeisance. With a gesture she motioned him to rise, and he hastened to lead her to the ivory chair, all the while bowing level with his girdle. But his first words were of reproof.

"Your Majesty! This was most unwise! The border is unsettled. Raids from the hills are incessant. You came with a large attendance?"

"An ample retinue followed me to Peshkhauri," she answered. "I lodged my people there and came on to the fort with my maid, Gitara."

Chunder Shan groaned in horror.

"Devi! You do not understand the peril. An hour's ride from this spot the hills swarm with barbarians who make a profession of murder and rapine. Women have been stolen and men stabbed between the fort and the city. Peshkhauri is not like your southern provinces——"

"But I am here, and unharmed," she interrupted with a trace of impatience. "I showed my signet ring to the guard at the gate, and to the one outside your door, and they admitted me unannounced, not knowing me, but supposing me to be a secret courier from Ayodhya. Let us not now waste time.

"You have received no word from the chief of the barbarians?"

"None save threats and curses, Devi. He is wary and suspicious. He deems it a trap, and perhaps he is not to be blamed. The Kshatriyas have not always kept their promises to the hill people."

"He must be brought to terms!" broke in Yasmina, the knuckles of her clenched hands showing white.

"I do not understand." The governor shook his head. "When I chanced to capture these seven hillmen, I reported their capture to the *wazam,* as is the custom, and then, before I could hang them, there came an order to hold them and communicate with their chief. This I did, but the man holds aloof, as I have said. These men are of the tribe of Afghulis, but he is a foreigner from the west, and he is called Conan. I have threatened to hang them tomorrow at dawn, if he does not come."

"Good!" exclaimed the Devi. "You have done well. And I will tell you why I have given these orders. My brother——" she faltered, choking, and the governor bowed his head, with the customary gesture of respect for a departed sovereign.

"The king of Vendhya was destroyed by magic," she said at last. "I have devoted my life to the destruction of his murderers. As he died he gave me a clue, and I have followed it. I have read the Book of Skalos, and talked with nameless hermits in the caves below Jhelai. I learned how, and by whom, he was destroyed. His enemies were the Black Seers of Mount Yimsha."

"Asura!" whispered Chunder Shan, paling.

Her eyes knifed him through. "Do you fear them?"

"Who does not, your Majesty?" he replied. "They are black devils, haunting the uninhabited hills beyond the Zhaibar. But the sages say that they seldom interfere in the lives of mortal men."

"Why they slew my brother I do not know," she answered. "But I have sworn on the altar of Asura to destroy them! And I need the aid of a man beyond the border. A Kshatriya army, unaided, would never reach Yimsha."

"Aye," muttered Chunder Shan. "You speak the truth there. It would be fight every step of the way, with hairy hillmen hurling down boulders from every height, and rushing us with their long knives in every valley. The Turanians fought their way through the Himelians once, but how many returned to Khurusun? Few of those who escaped the swords of the Kshatriyas, after the king, your brother, defeated their host on the Jhumda River, ever saw Secunderam again."

"And so I must control men across the border," she said, "men who know the way to Mount Yimsha——"

"BUT the tribes fear the Black Seers and shun the unholy mountain," broke in the governor.

"Does the chief, Conan, fear them?" she asked.

"Well, as to that," muttered the governor, "I doubt if there is anything that devil fears."

"So I have been told. Therefore he is the man I must deal with. He wishes the release of his seven men. Very well; their ransom shall be the heads of the Black Seers!" Her voice thrummed with hate as she uttered the last words, and her hands clenched at her sides. She looked an image of incarnate passion as she stood there with her head thrown high and her bosom heaving.

Again the governor knelt, for part of his wisdom was the knowledge that a woman in such an emotional tempest is as perilous as a blind cobra to any about her.

"It shall be as you wish, your Majesty." Then as she presented a calmer aspect, he rose and ventured to drop a word of warning. "I can not predict what the chief Conan's action will be. The tribes-

men are always turbulent, and I have reason to believe that emissaries from the Turanians are stirring them up to raid our borders. As your majesty knows, the Turanians have established themselves in Secunderam and other northern cities, though the hill tribes remain unconquered. King Yezdigerd has long looked southward with greedy lust and perhaps is seeking to gain by treachery what he could not win by force of arms. I have thought that Conan might well be one of his spies."

"We shall see," she answered. "If he loves his followers, he will be at the gates at dawn, to parley. I shall spend the night in the fortress. I came in disguise to Peshkhauri, and lodged my retinue at an inn instead of the palace. Besides my people, only yourself knows of my presence here."

"I shall escort you to your quarters, your Majesty," said the governor, and as they emerged from the doorway, he beckoned the warrior on guard there, and the man fell in behind them, spear held at salute.

The maid waited, veiled like her mistress, outside the door, and the group traversed a wide, winding corridor, lighted by smoky torches, and reached the quarters reserved for visiting notables—generals and viceroys, mostly; none of the royal family had ever honored the fortress before. Chunder Shan had a perturbed feeling that the suite was not suitable to such an exalted personage as the Devi, and though she sought to make him feel at ease in her presence, he was glad when she dismissed him and he bowed himself out. All the menials of the fort had been summoned to serve his royal guest—though he did not divulge her identity—and he stationed a squad of spearmen before her doors, among them the warrior who had guarded his own chamber. In his preoccupation he forgot to replace the man.

The governor had not been gone long from her when Yasmina suddenly remembered something else which she had wished to discuss with him, but had forgotten until that moment. It concerned the past actions of one Kerim Shah, a nobleman from Iranistan, who had dwelt for a while in Peshkhauri before coming on to the court at Ayodhya. A vague suspicion concerning the man had been stirred by a glimpse of him in Peshkhauri that night. She wondered if he had followed her from Ayodhya. Being a truly remarkable Devi, she did not summon the governor to her again, but hurried out into the corridor alone, and hastened toward his chamber.

CHUNDER SHAN, entering his chamber, closed the door and went to his table. There he took the letter he had been writing and tore it to bits. Scarcely had he finished when he heard something drop softly onto the parapet adjacent to the window. He looked up to see a figure loom briefly against the stars, and then a man dropped lightly into the room. The light glinted on a long sheen of steel in his hand.

"Shhhh!" he warned. "Don't make a noise, or I'll send the devil a henchman!"

The governor checked his motion toward the sword on the table. He was within reach of the yard-long Zhaibar knife that glittered in the intruder's fist, and he knew the desperate quickness of a hillman.

The invader was a tall man, at once strong and supple. He was dressed like a hillman, but his dark features and blazing blue eyes did not match his garb. Chunder Shan had never seen a man like him; he was not an Easterner, but some barbarian from the West. But his aspect was as

untamed and formidable as any of the hairy tribesmen who haunt the hills of Ghulistan.

"You come like a thief in the night," commented the governor, recovering some of his composure, although he remembered that there was no guard within call. Still, the hillman could not know that.

"I climbed a bastion," snarled the intruder. "A guard thrust his head over the battlement in time for me to rap it with my knife-hilt."

"You are Conan?"

"Who else? You sent word into the hills that you wished for me to come and parley with you. Well, by Crom, I've come! Keep away from that table or I'll gut you."

"I merely wish to seat myself," answered the governor, carefully sinking into the ivory chair, which he wheeled away from the table. Conan moved restlessly before him, glancing suspiciously at the door, thumbing the razor edge of his three-foot knife. He did not walk like an Afghuli, and was bluntly direct where the East is subtle.

"You have seven of my men," he said abruptly. "You refused the ransom I offered. What the devil do you want?"

"Let us discuss terms," answered Chunder Shan cautiously.

"Terms?" There was a timbre of dangerous anger in his voice. "What do you mean? Haven't I offered you gold?"

Chunder Shan laughed.

"Gold? There is more gold in Peshkhauri than you ever saw."

"You're a liar," retorted Conan. "I've seen the *suk* of the goldsmiths in Khurusun."

"Well, more than any Afghuli ever saw," amended Chunder Shan. "And it is but a drop of all the treasure of Vendhya. Why should we desire gold? It would be more to our advantage to hang these seven thieves."

Conan ripped out a sulfurous oath and the long blade quivered in his grip as the muscles rose in ridges on his brown arm.

"I'll split your head like a ripe melon!"

A wild blue flame flickered in the hillman's eyes, but Chunder Shan shrugged his shoulders, though keeping an eye on the keen steel.

"You can kill me easily, and probably escape over the wall afterward. But that would not save the seven tribesmen. My men would surely hang them. And these men are headmen among the Afghulis."

"I know it," snarled Conan. "The tribe is baying like wolves at my heels because I have not procured their release. Tell me in plain words what you want, because, by Crom! if there's no other way, I'll raise a horde and lead it to the very gates of Peshkhauri!"

Looking at the man as he stood squarely, knife in fist and eyes glaring, Chunder Shan did not doubt that he was capable of it. The governor did not believe any hill-horde could take Peshkhauri, but he did not wish a devastated countryside.

"There is a mission you must perform," he said, choosing his words with as much care as if they had been razors. "There——"

Conan had sprung back, wheeling to face the door at the same instant, lips asnarl. His barbarian ears had caught the quick tread of soft slippers outside the door. The next instant the door was thrown open and a slim, silk-robed form entered hastily, pulling the door shut—then stopping short at sight of the hillman.

Chunder Shan sprang up, his heart jumping into his mouth.

"Devi!" he cried involuntarily, losing his head momentarily in his fright.

"Devi!" It was like an explosive echo from the hillman's lips. Chunder Shan saw recognition and intent flame up in the fierce blue eyes.

The governor shouted desperately and caught at his sword, but the hillman moved with the devastating speed of a hurricane. He sprang, knocked the governor sprawling with a savage blow of his knife-hilt, swept up the astounded Devi in one brawny arm and leaped for the window. Chunder Shan, struggling frantically to his feet, saw the man poise an instant on the sill in a flutter of silken skirts and white limbs that was his royal captive, and heard his fierce, exultant snarl: *"Now* dare to hang my men!" and then Conan leaped to the parapet and was gone. A wild scream floated back to the governor's ears.

"Guard! *Guard!"* screamed the governor, struggling up and running drunkenly to the door. He tore it open and reeled into the hall. His shouts re-echoed along the corridors, and warriors came running, gaping to see the governor holding his broken head, from which the blood streamed.

"Turn out the lancers!" he roared. "There has been an abduction!" Even in his frenzy he had enough sense left to withhold the full truth. He stopped short as he heard a sudden drum of hoofs outside, a frantic scream and a wild yell of barbaric exultation.

Followed by the bewildered guardsmen, the governor raced for the stair. In the courtyard of the fort a force of lancers always stood by saddled steeds, ready to ride at an instant's notice. Chunder Shan led his squadron flying after the fugitive, though his head swam so he had to hold with both hands to the saddle. He did not divulge the identity of the victim, but said merely that the noblewoman who had borne the royal signet-ring had been carried away by the chief of the Afghulis. The abductor was out of sight and hearing, but they knew the path he would strike—the road that runs straight to the mouth of the Zhaibar. There was no moon; peasant huts rose dimly in the starlight. Behind them fell away the grim bastion of the fort, and the towers of Peshkhauri. Ahead of them loomed the black walls of the Himelians.

3. *Khemsa Uses Magic*

IN THE confusion that reigned in the fortress while the guard was being turned out, no one noticed that the girl who had accompanied the Devi slipped out the great arched gate and vanished in the darkness. She ran straight for the city, her garments tucked high. She did not follow the open road, but cut straight through fields and over slopes, avoiding fences and leaping irrigation ditches as surely as if it were broad daylight, and as easily as if she were a trained masculine runner. The hoof-drum of the guardsmen had faded away up the hill road before she reached the city wall. She did not go to the great gate, beneath whose arch men leaned on spears and craned their necks into the darkness, discussing the unwonted activity about the fortress. She skirted the wall until she reached a certain point where the spire of a tower was visible above the battlements. Then she placed her hands to her mouth and voiced a low weird call that carried strangely.

Almost instantly a head appeared at an embrasure and a rope came wriggling down the wall. She seized it, placed a foot in the loop at the end, and waved her arm. Then quickly and smoothly she was drawn up the sheer stone curtain. An instant later she scrambled over the merlons and stood up on a flat roof which covered a house that was built against

the wall. There was an open trap there, and a man in a camel-hair robe who silently coiled the rope, not showing in any way the strain of hauling a full-grown woman up a forty-foot wall.

"Where is Kerim Shah?" she gasped, panting after her long run.

"Asleep in the house below. You have news?"

"Conan has stolen the Devi out of the fortress and carried her away into the hills!" She blurted out her news in a rush, the words stumbling over one another.

Khemsa showed no emotion, but merely nodded his turbaned head. "Kerim Shah will be glad to hear that," he said.

"Wait!" The girl threw her supple arms about his neck. She was panting hard, but not only from exertion. Her eyes blazed like black jewels in the starlight. Her upturned face was close to Khemsa's, but though he submitted to her embrace, he did not return it.

"Do not tell the Hyrkanian!" she panted. "Let us use this knowledge ourselves! The governor has gone into the hills with his riders, but he might as well chase a ghost. He has not told anyone that it was the Devi who was kidnapped. None in Peshkhauri or the fort knows it except us."

"But what good does it do us?" the man expostulated. "My masters sent me with Kerim Shah to aid him in every way——"

"Aid yourself!" she cried fiercely. "Shake off your yoke!"

"You mean—disobey my masters?" he gasped, and she felt his whole body turn cold under her arms.

"Aye!" she shook him in the fury of her emotion. "You too are a magician! Why will you be a slave, using your powers only to elevate others? Use your arts for yourself!"

"That is forbidden!" He was shaking as if with an ague. "I am not one of the Black Circle. Only by the command of the masters do I dare to use the knowledge they have taught me."

"But you *can* use it!" she argued passionately. "Do as I beg you! Of course Conan has taken the Devi to hold as hostage against the seven tribesmen in the governor's prison. Destroy them, so Chunder Shan can not use them to buy back the Devi. Then let us go into the mountains and take her from the Afghulis. They can not stand against your sorcery with their knives. The treasure of the Vendhyan kings will be ours as ransom—and then when we have it in our hands, we can trick them, and sell her to the king of Turan. We shall have wealth beyond our maddest dreams. With it we can buy warriors. We will take Khorbhul, oust the Turanians from the hills, and send our hosts southward; become king and queen of an empire!"

Khemsa too was panting, shaking like a leaf in her grasp; his face showed gray in the starlight, beaded with great drops of perspiration.

"I love you!" she cried fiercely, writhing her body against his, almost strangling him in her wild embrace, shaking him in her abandon. "I will make a king of you! For love of you I betrayed my mistress; for love of me betray your masters! Why fear the Black Seers? By your love for me you have broken one of their laws already! Break the rest! You are as strong as they!"

A man of ice could not have withstood the searing heat of her passion and fury. With an inarticulate cry he crushed her to him, bending her backward and showering gasping kisses on her eyes, face and lips.

"I'll do it!" His voice was thick with laboring emotions. He staggered like a

drunken man. "The arts they have taught me shall work for me, not for my masters. We shall be rulers of the world—of the world——"

"Come then!" Twisting lithely out of his embrace, she seized his hand and led him toward the trap-door. "First we must make sure that the governor does not exchange those seven Afghulis for the Devi."

HE MOVED like a man in a daze, until they had descended a ladder and she paused in the chamber below. Kerim Shah lay on a couch motionless, an arm across his face as though to shield his sleeping eyes from the soft light of a brass lamp. She plucked Khemsa's arm and made a quick gesture across her own throat. Khemsa lifted his hand; then his expression changed and he drew away.

"I have eaten his salt," he muttered. "Besides, he can not interfere with us."

He led the girl through a door that opened on a winding stair. After their soft tread had faded into silence, the man on the couch sat up. Kerim Shah wiped the sweat from his face. A knife-thrust he did not dread, but he feared Khemsa as a man fears a poisonous reptile.

"People who plot on roofs should remember to lower their voices," he muttered. "But as Khemsa has turned against his masters, and as he was my only contact between them, I can count on their aid no longer. From now on I play the game in my own way."

Rising to his feet he went quickly to a table, drew pen and parchment from his girdle and scribbled a few succinct lines.

"To Khosru Khan, governor of Secunderam: the Cimmerian Conan has carried the Devi Yasmina to the villages of the Afghulis. It is an opportunity to get the Devi into our hands, as the king has so long desired. Send three thousand horsemen at once. I will meet them in the valley of Gurashah with native guides."

And he signed it with a name that was not in the least like Kerim Shah.

Then from a golden cage he drew forth a carrier pigeon, to whose leg he made fast the parchment, rolled into a tiny cylinder and secured with gold wire. Then he went quickly to a casement and tossed the bird into the night. It wavered on fluttering wings, balanced, and was gone like a flitting shadow. Catching up helmet, sword and cloak, Kerim Shah hurried out of the chamber and down the winding stair.

THE prison quarters of Peshkhauri were separated from the rest of the city by a massive wall, in which was set a single iron-bound door under an arch. Over the arch burned a lurid red cresset, and beside the door squatted a warrior with spear and shield.

This warrior, leaning on his spear, and yawning from time to time, started suddenly to his feet. He had not thought he had dozed, but a man was standing before him, a man he had not heard approach. The man wore a camel-hair robe and a green turban. In the flickering light of the cresset his features were shadowy, but a pair of lambent eyes shone surprizingly in the lurid glow.

"Who comes?" demanded the warrior, presenting his spear. "Who are you?"

The stranger did not seem perturbed, though the spear-point touched his bosom. His eyes held the warrior's with strange intensity.

"What are you obliged to do?" he asked, strangely.

"To guard the gate!" The warrior spoke thickly and mechanically; he stood rigid as a statue, his eyes slowly glazing.

"You lie! You are obliged to obey me! You have looked into my eyes, and your soul is no longer your own. Open that door!"

Stiffly, with the wooden features of an image, the guard wheeled about, drew a great key from his girdle, turned it in the massive lock and swung open the door. Then he stood at attention, his unseeing stare straight ahead of him.

A woman glided from the shadows and laid an eager hand on the mesmerist's arm.

"Bid him fetch us horses, Khemsa," she whispered.

"No need of that," answered the Rakhsha. Lifting his voice slightly he spoke to the guardsman. "I have no more use for you. Kill yourself!"

Like a man in a trance the warrior thrust the butt of his spear against the base of the wall, and placed the keen head against his body, just below the ribs. Then slowly, stolidly, he leaned against it with all his weight, so that it transfixed his body and came out between his shoulders. Sliding down the shaft he lay still, the spear jutting above him its full length, like a horrible stalk growing out of his back.

The girl stared down at him in morbid fascination, until Khemsa took her arm and led her through the gate. Torches lighted a narrow space between the outer wall and a lower inner one, in which were arched doors at regular intervals. A warrior paced this enclosure, and when the gate opened he came sauntering up, so secure in his knowledge of the prison's strength that he was not suspicious until Khemsa and the girl emerged from the archway. Then it was too late. The Rahksha did not waste time in hypnotism, though his action savored of magic to the girl. The guard lowered his spear threateningly, opening his mouth to shout an alarm that would bring spearmen swarming out of the guardrooms at either end of the alleyway. Khemsa flicked the spear aside with his left hand, as a man might flick a straw, and his right flashed out and back, seeming gently to caress the warrior's neck in passing. And the guard pitched on his face without a sound, his head lolling on a broken neck.

Khemsa did not glance at him, but went straight to one of the arched doors and placed his open hand against the heavy bronze lock. With a rending shudder the portal buckled inward. As the girl followed him through, she saw that the thick teakwood hung in splinters, the bronze bolts were bent and twisted from their sockets, and the great hinges broken and disjointed. A thousand-pound battering-ram with forty men to swing it could have shattered the barrier no more completely. Khemsa was drunk with freedom and the exercise of his power, glorying in his might and flinging his strength about as a young giant exercises his thews with unnecessary vigor in the exultant pride of his prowess.

The broken door let them into a small courtyard, lit by a cresset. Opposite the door was a wide grille of iron bars. A hairy hand was visible, gripping one of these bars, and in the darkness behind them glimmered the whites of eyes.

Khemsa stood silent for a space, gazing into the shadows from which those glimmering eyes gave back his stare with burning intensity. Then his hand went into his robe and came out again, and from his opening fingers a shimmering feather of sparkling dust sifted to the flags. Instantly a flare of green fire lighted the enclosure. In the brief glare the forms of seven men, standing motionless behind the bars, were limned in vivid detail; tall, hairy men in ragged hillmen's garments. They did not speak, but in their eyes blazed the fear of death, and their hairy fingers gripped the bars.

The fire died out but the glow re-

mained, a quivering ball of lambent green that pulsed and shimmered on the flags before Khemsa's feet. The wide gaze of the tribesmen was fixed upon it. It wavered, elongated; it turned into a luminous green smoke spiraling upward. It twisted and writhed like a great shadowy serpent, then broadened and billowed out in shining folds and whirls. It grew to a cloud moving silently over the flags—straight toward the grille. The men watched its coming with dilated eyes; the bars quivered with the grip of their desperate fingers. Bearded lips parted but no sound came forth. The green cloud rolled on the bars and blotted them from sight; like a fog it oozed through the grille and hid the men within. From the enveloping folds came a strangled gasp, as of a man plunged suddenly under the surface of water. That was all.

Khemsa touched the girl's arm, as she stood with parted lips and dilated eyes. Mechanically she turned away with him, looking back over her shoulder. Already the mist was thinning; close to the bars she saw a pair of sandaled feet, the toes turned upward—she glimpsed the indistinct outlines of seven still, prostrate shapes.

"And now for a steed swifter than the fastest horse ever bred in a mortal stable," Khemsa was saying. "We will be in Afghulistan before dawn."

4. *An Encounter in the Pass*

YASMINA DEVI could never clearly remember the details of her abduction. The unexpectedness and violence stunned her; she had only a confused impression of a whirl of happenings—the terrifying grip of a mighty arm, the blazing eyes of her abductor, and his hot breath burning on her flesh. The leap through the window to the parapet, the mad race across battlements and roofs when the fear of falling froze her, the reckless descent of a rope bound to a merlon—he went down almost at a run, his captive folded limply over his brawny shoulder—all this was a befuddled tangle in the Devi's mind. She retained a more vivid memory of him running fleetly into the shadows of the trees, carrying her like a child, and vaulting into the saddle of a fierce Bhalkhana stallion which reared and snorted. Then there was a sensation of flying, and the racing hoofs were striking sparks of fire from the flinty road as the stallion swept up the slopes.

As the girl's mind cleared, her first sensations were furious rage and shame. She was appalled. The rulers of the golden kingdoms south of the Himelians were considered little short of divine; and she was the Devi of Vendhya! Fright was submerged in regal wrath. She cried out furiously and began struggling. She, Yasmina, to be carried on the saddle-bow of a hill chief, like a common wench of the market-place! He merely hardened his massive thews slightly against her writhings, and for the first time in her life she experienced the coercion of superior physical strength. His arms felt like iron about her slender limbs. He glanced down at her and grinned hugely. His teeth glimmered whitely in the starlight. The reins lay loose on the stallion's flowing mane, and every thew and fiber of the great beast strained as he hurtled along the boulder-strewn trail. But Conan sat easily, almost carelessly, in the saddle, riding like a centaur.

"You hill-bred dog!" she panted, quivering with the impact of shame, anger, and the realization of helplessness. "You dare—you *dare!* Your life shall pay for this! Where are you taking me?"

"To the villages of Afghulistan," he answered, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Behind them, beyond the slopes they had traversed, torches were tossing on the walls of the fortress, and he glimpsed a flare of light that meant the great gate had been opened. And he laughed, a deep-throated boom gusty as the hill wind.

"The governor has sent his riders after us," he laughed. "By Crom, we will lead him a merry chase! What do you think, Devi—will they pay seven lives for a Kshatriya princess?"

"They will send an army to hang you and your spawn of devils," she promised him with conviction.

He laughed gustily and shifted her to a more comfortable position in his arms. But she took this as a fresh outrage, and renewed her vain struggles, until she saw that her efforts were only amusing him. Besides, her light silken garments, floating on the wind, were being outrageously disarranged by her struggles. She concluded that a scornful submission was the better part of dignity, and lapsed into a smoldering quiescence.

She felt even her anger being submerged by awe as they entered the mouth of the Pass, lowering like a black well mouth in the blacker walls that rose like colossal ramparts to bar their way. It was as if a gigantic knife had cut the Zhaibar out of walls of solid rock. On either hand sheer slopes pitched up for thousands of feet, and the mouth of the Pass was dark as hate. Even Conan could not see with any accuracy, but he knew the road, even by night. And knowing that armed men were racing through the starlight after him, he did not check the stallion's speed. The great brute was not yet showing fatigue. He thundered along the road that followed the valley bed, labored up a slope, swept along a low ridge where treacherous shale on either hand lurked for the unwary, and came upon a trail that followed the lap of the left-hand wall.

Not even Conan could spy, in that darkness, an ambush set by Zhaibar tribesmen. As they swept past the black mouth of a gorge that opened into the Pass, a javelin swished through the air and thudded home behind the stallion's straining shoulder. The great beast let out his life in a shuddering sob and stumbled, going headlong in midstride. But Conan had recognized the flight and stroke of the javelin, and he acted with spring-steel quickness.

As the horse fell he leaped clear, holding the girl aloft to guard her from striking boulders. He lit on his feet like a cat, thrust her into a cleft of rock, and wheeled toward the outer darkness, drawing his knife.

Yasmina, confused by the rapidity of events, not quite sure just what had happened, saw a vague shape rush out of the darkness, bare feet slapping softly on the rock, ragged garments whipping on the wind of his haste. She glimpsed the flicker of steel, heard the lightning crack of stroke, parry and counter-stroke, and the crunch of bone as Conan's long knife split the other's skull.

Conan sprang back, crouching in the shelter of the rocks. Out in the night men were moving and a stentorian voice roared: "What, you dogs! Do you flinch? In, curse you, and take them!"

Conan started, peered into the darkness and lifted his voice.

"Yar Afzal! Is it you?"

There sounded a startled imprecation, and the voice called warily.

"Conan? Is it you, Conan?"

"Aye!" The Cimmerian laughed. "Come forth, you old war-dog. I've slain one of your men."

There was movement among the rocks,

a light flared dimly, and then a flame appeared and came bobbing toward him, and as it approached, a fierce bearded countenance grew out of the darkness. The man who carried it held it high, thrust forward, and craned his neck to peer among the boulders it lighted; the other hand gripped a great curved tulwar. Conan stepped forward, sheathing his knife, and the other roared a greeting.

"Aye, it is Conan! Come out of your rocks, dogs! It is Conan!"

Others pressed into the wavering circle of light—wild, ragged, bearded men, with eyes like wolves, and long blades in their fists. They did not see Yasmina, for she was hidden by Conan's massive body. But peeping from her covert, she knew icy fear for the first time that night. These men were more like wolves than human beings.

"What are you hunting in the Zhaibar by night, Yar Afzal?" Conan demanded of the burly chief, who grinned like a bearded ghoul.

"Who knows what might come up the Pass after dark? We Wazulis are nighthawks. But what of you, Conan?"

"I have a prisoner," answered the Cimmerian. And moving aside he disclosed the cowering girl. Reaching a long arm into the crevice he drew her trembling forth.

Her imperious bearing was gone. She stared timidly at the ring of bearded faces that hemmed her in, and was grateful for the strong arm that clasped her possessively. The torch was thrust close to her, and there was a sucking intake of breath about the ring.

"She is my captive," Conan warned, glancing pointedly at the feet of the man he had slain, just visible within the ring of light. "I was taking her to Afghulistan, but now you have slain my horse, and the Kshatriyas are close behind me."

"Come with us to my village," suggested Yar Afzal. "We have horses hidden in the gorge. They can never follow us in the darkness. They are close behind you, you say?"

"So close that I hear now the clink of their hoofs on the flint," answered Conan grimly.

Instantly there was movement; the torch was dashed out and the ragged shapes melted like phantoms into the darkness. Conan swept up the Devi in his arms, and she did not resist. The rocky ground hurt her slim feet in their soft slippers and she felt very small and helpless in that brutish, primordial blackness among those colossal, nighted crags.

Feeling her shiver in the wind that moaned down the defiles, Conan jerked a ragged cloak from its owner's shoulders and wrapped it about her. He also hissed a warning in her ear, ordering her to make no sound. She did not hear the distant clink of shod hoofs on rock that warned the keen-eared hillmen; but she was far too frightened to disobey, in any event.

She could see nothing but a few faint stars far above, but she knew by the deepening darkness when they entered the gorge mouth. There was a stir about them, the uneasy movement of horses. A few muttered words, and Conan mounted the horse of the man he had killed, lifting the girl up in front of him. Like phantoms except for the click of their hoofs, the band swept away up the shadowy gorge. Behind them on the trail they left the dead horse and the dead man, which were found less than half an hour later by the riders from the fortress, who recognized the man as a Wazuli and drew their own conclusions accordingly.

YASMINA, snuggled warmly in her captor's arms, grew drowsy in spite of herself. The motion of the horse, though

it was uneven, uphill and down, yet possessed a certain rhythm which combined with weariness and emotional exhaustion to force sleep upon her. She had lost all sense of time or direction. They moved in soft thick darkness, in which she sometimes glimpsed vaguely gigantic walls sweeping up like black ramparts, or great crags shouldering the stars; at times she sensed echoing depths beneath them, or felt the wind of dizzy heights blowing cold about her. Gradually these things faded into a dreamy unwakefulness in which the clink of hoofs and the creak of saddles were like the irrelevant sounds in a dream.

She was vaguely aware when the motion ceased and she was lifted down and carried a few steps. Then she was laid down on something soft and rustling, and something—a folded coat perhaps—was thrust under her head, and the cloak in which she was wrapped was carefully tucked about her. She heard Yar Afzal laugh.

"A rare prize, Conan; fit mate for a chief of the Afghulis."

"Not for me," came Conan's answering rumble. "This wench will buy the lives of my seven headmen, blast their souls."

That was the last she heard as she sank into dreamless slumber.

She slept while armed men rode through the dark hills, and the fate of kingdoms hung in the balance. Through the shadowy gorges and defiles that night there rang the hoofs of galloping horses, and the starlight glimmered on helmets and curved blades, until the ghoulish shapes that haunt the crags stared into the darkness from ravine and boulder and wondered what things were afoot.

A band of these sat gaunt horses in the black pit-mouth of a gorge as the hurrying hoofs swept past. Their leader, a well-built man in a helmet and gilt-braided cloak, held up his hand warningly, until the riders had sped on. Then he laughed softly.

"They must have lost the trail! Or else they have found that Conan has already reached the Afghuli villages. It will take many riders to smoke out that hive. There will be squadrons riding up the Zhaibar by dawn."

"If there is fighting in the hills there will be looting," muttered a voice behind him, in the dialect of the Irakzai.

"There will be looting," answered the man with the helmet. "But first it is our business to reach the valley of Gurashah and await the riders that will be galloping southward from Secunderam before daylight."

He lifted his reins and rode out of the defile, his men falling in behind him—thirty ragged phantoms in the starlight.

5. *The Black Stallion*

THE sun was well up when Yasmina awoke. She did not start and stare blankly, wondering where she was. She awoke with full knowledge of all that had occurred. Her supple limbs were stiff from her long ride, and her firm flesh still seemed to feel the contact of the muscular arm that had borne her so far.

She was lying on a sheepskin covering a pallet of leaves on a hard-beaten dirt floor. A folded sheepskin coat was under her head, and she was wrapped in a ragged cloak. She was in a large room, the walls of which were crudely but strongly built of uncut rocks, plastered with sun-baked mud. Heavy beams supported a roof of the same kind, in which showed a trap-door up to which led a ladder. There were no windows in the thick walls, only loop-holes. There was one door, a sturdy bronze affair that must have been looted from some Vendhyan

border tower. Opposite it was a wide opening in the wall, with no door, but several strong wooden bars in place. Beyond them Yasmina saw a magnificent black stallion munching a pile of dried grass. The building was fort, dwelling-place and stable in one.

At the other end of the room a girl in the vest and baggy trousers of a hill-woman squatted beside a small fire, cooking strips of meat on an iron grid laid over blocks of stone. There was a sooty cleft in the wall a few feet from the floor, and some of the smoke found its way out there. The rest floated in blue wisps about the room.

The hill-girl glanced at Yasmina over her shoulder, displaying a bold, handsome face, and then continued her cooking. Voices boomed outside; then the door was kicked open, and Conan strode in. He looked more enormous than ever with the morning sunlight behind him, and Yasmina noted some details that had escaped her the night before. His garments were clean and not ragged. The broad Bakhariot girdle that supported his knife in its ornamented scabbard would have matched the robes of a prince, and there was a glint of fine Turanian mail under his shirt.

"Your captive is awake, Conan," said the Wazuli girl, and he grunted, strode up to the fire and swept the strips of mutton off into a stone dish.

The squatting girl laughed up at him, with some spicy jest, and he grinned wolfishly, and hooking a toe under her haunches, tumbled her sprawling onto the floor. She seemed to derive considerable amusement from this bit of rough horse-play, but Conan paid no more heed to her. Producing a great hunk of bread from somewhere, with a copper jug of wine, he carried the lot to Yasmina, who had risen from her pallet and was regarding him doubtfully.

"Rough fare for a Devi, girl, but our best," he grunted. "It will fill your belly, at least."

He set the platter on the floor, and she was suddenly aware of a ravenous hunger. Making no comment, she seated herself cross-legged on the floor, and taking the dish in her lap, she began to eat, using her fingers, which were all she had in the way of table utensils. After all, adaptability is one of the tests of true aristocracy. Conan stood looking down at her, his thumbs hooked in his girdle. He never sat cross-legged, after the Eastern fashion.

"Where am I?" she asked abruptly.

"In the hut of Yar Afzal, the chief of the Khurum Wazulis," he answered. "Afghulistan lies a good many miles farther on to the west. We'll hide here awhile. The Kshatriyas are beating up the hills for you—several of their squads have been cut up by the tribes already."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Keep you until Chundar Shan is willing to trade back my seven cow-thieves," he grunted. "Women of the Wazulis are crushing ink out of *shoki* leaves, and after a while you can write a letter to the governor."

A touch of her old imperious wrath shook her, as she thought how maddeningly her plans had gone awry, leaving her captive of the very man she had plotted to get into her power. She flung down the dish, with the remnants of her meal, and sprang to her feet, tense with anger.

"I will not write a letter! If you do not take me back, they will hang your seven men, and a thousand more besides!"

The Wazuli girl laughed mockingly, Conan scowled, and then the door opened and Yar Afzal came swaggering in. The

Wazuli chief was as tall as Conan, and of greater girth, but he looked fat and slow beside the hard compactness of the Cimmerian. He plucked his red-stained beard and stared meaningly at the Wazuli girl, and that wench rose and scurried out without delay. Then Yar Afzal turned to his guest.

"The damnable people murmur, Conan," quoth he. "They wish me to murder you and take the girl to hold for ransom. They say that anyone can tell by her garments that she is a noble lady. They say why should the Afghuli dogs profit by her, when it is the people who take the risk of guarding her?"

"Lend me your horse," said Conan. "I'll take her and go."

"Pish!" boomed Yar Afzal. "Do you think I can't handle my own people? I'll have them dancing in their shirts if they cross me! They don't love you—or any other outlander—but you saved my life once, and I will not forget. Come out, though, Conan; a scout has returned."

CONAN hitched at his girdle and followed the chief outside. They closed the door after them, and Yasmina peeped through a loop-hole. She looked out on a level space before the hut. At the farther end of that space there was a cluster of mud and stone huts, and she saw naked children playing among the boulders, and the slim erect women of the hills going about their tasks.

Directly before the chief's hut a circle of hairy, ragged men squatted, facing the door. Conan and Yar Afzal stood a few paces before the door, and between them and the ring of warriors another man sat cross-legged. This one was addressing his chief in the harsh accents of the Wazuli which Yasmina could scarcely understand, though as part of her royal education she had been taught the languages of Iranistan and the kindred tongues of Ghulistan.

"I talked with a Dagozai who saw the riders last night," said the scout. "He was lurking near when they came to the spot where we ambushed the lord Conan. He overheard their speech. Chunder Shan was with them. They found the dead horse, and one of the men recognized it as Conan's. Then they found the man Conan slew, and knew him for a Wazuli. It seemed to them that Conan had been slain and the girl taken by the Wazuli; so they turned aside from their purpose of following to Afghulistan. But they did not know from which village the dead man was come, and we had left no trail a Kshatriya could follow.

"So they rode to the nearest Wazuli village, which was the village of Jugra, and burnt it and slew many of the people. But the men of Khojur came upon them in darkness and slew some of them, and wounded the governor. So the survivors retired down the Zhaibar in the darkness before dawn, but they returned with reinforcements before sunrise, and there has been skirmishing and fighting in the hills all morning. It is said that a great army is being raised to sweep the hills about the Zhaibar. The tribes are whetting their knives and laying ambushes in every pass from here to Gurashah valley. Moreover, Kerim Shah has returned to the hills."

A grunt went around the circle, and Yasmina leaned closer to the loop-hole at the name she had begun to mistrust.

"Where went he?" demanded Yar Afzal.

"The Dagozai did not know; with him were thirty Irakzai of the lower villages. They rode into the hills and disappeared."

"These Irakzai are jackals that follow a lion for crumbs," growled Yar Afzal. "They have been lapping up the coins

Kerim Shah scatters among the border tribes to buy men like horses. I like him not, for all he is our kinsman from Iranistan."

"He's not even that," said Conan. "I know him of old. He's an Hyrkanian, a spy of Yezdigerd's. If I catch him I'll hang his hide to a tamarisk."

"But the Kshatriyas!" clamored the men in the semicircle. "Are we to squat on our haunches until they smoke us out? They will learn at last in which Wazuli village the wench is held. We are not loved by the Zhaibari; they will help the Kshatriyas hunt us out."

"Let them come," grunted Yar Afzal. "We can hold the defiles against a host."

One of the men leaped up and shook his fist at Conan.

"Are we to take all the risks while he reaps the rewards?" he howled. "Are we to fight his battles for him?"

With a stride Conan reached him and bent slightly to stare full into his hairy face. The Cimmerian had not drawn his long knife, but his left hand grasped the scabbard, jutting the hilt suggestively forward.

"I ask no man to fight my battles," he said softly. "Draw your blade if you dare, you yapping dog!"

The Wazuli started back, snarling like a cat.

"Dare to touch me and here are fifty men to rend you apart!" he screeched.

"What!" roared Yar Afzal, his face purpling with wrath. His whiskers bristled, his belly swelled with his rage. "Are you chief of Khurum? Do the Wazulis take orders from Yar Afzal, or from a low-bred cur?"

The man cringed before his invincible chief, and Yar Afzal, striding up to him, seized him by the throat and choked him until his face was turning black. Then he hurled the man savagely against the ground and stood over him with his tulwar in his hand.

"Is there any who questions my authority?" he roared, and his warriors looked down sullenly as his bellicose glare swept their semicircle. Yar Afzal grunted scornfully and sheathed his weapon with a gesture that was the apex of insult. Then he kicked the fallen agitator with a concentrated vindictiveness that brought howls from his victim.

"Get down the valley to the watchers on the heights and bring word if they have seen anything," commanded Yar Afzal, and the man went, shaking with fear and grinding his teeth with fury.

Yar Afzal then seated himself ponderously on a stone, growling in his beard. Conan stood near him, legs braced apart, thumbs hooked in his girdle, narrowly watching the assembled warriors. They stared at him sullenly, not daring to brave Yar Afzal's fury, but hating the foreigner as only a hillman can hate.

"Now listen to me, you sons of nameless dogs, while I tell you what the lord Conan and I have planned to fool the Kshatriyas"—the boom of Yar Afzal's bull-like voice followed the discomfited warrior as he slunk away from the assembly.

The man passed by the cluster of huts, where women who had seen his defeat laughed at him and called stinging comments, and hastened on along the trail that wound among spurs and rocks toward the valley head.

Just as he rounded the first turn that took him out of sight of the village, he stopped short, gaping stupidly. He had not believed it possible for a stranger to enter the valley of Khurum without being detected by the hawk-eyed watchers along the heights; yet a man sat cross-legged on a low ledge beside the path—a man in a camel-hair robe and a green turban.

The Wazuli's mouth gaped for a yell, and his hand leaped to his knife-hilt. But at that instant his eyes met those of the stranger and the cry died in his throat, his fingers went limp. He stood like a statue, his own eyes glazed and vacant.

For minutes the scene held motionless; then the man on the ledge drew a cryptic symbol in the dust on the rock with his forefinger. The Wazuli did not see him place anything within the compass of that emblem, but presently something gleamed there—a round, shiny black ball that looked like polished jade. The man in the green turban took this up and tossed it to the Wazuli, who mechanically caught it.

"Carry this to Yar Afzal," he said, and the Wazuli turned like an automaton and went back along the path, holding the black jade ball in his outstretched hand. He did not even turn his head to the renewed jeers of the women as he passed the huts. He did not seem to hear.

The man on the ledge gazed after him with a cryptic smile. A girl's head rose above the rim of the ledge and she looked at him with admiration and a touch of fear that had not been present the night before.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

He ran his fingers through her dark locks caressingly.

"Are you still dizzy from your flight on the horse-of-air, that you doubt my wisdom?" he laughed. "As long as Yar Afzal lives, Conan will bide safe among the Wazuli fighting-men. Their knives are sharp, and there are many of them. What I plot will be safer, even for me, than to seek to slay him and take her from among them. It takes no wizard to predict what the Wazulis will do, and what Conan will do, when my victim hands the globe of Yezud to the chief of Khurum."

Back before the hut, Yar Afzal halted in the midst of some tirade, surprized and displeased to see the man he had sent up the valley, pushing his way through the throng.

"I bade you go to the watchers!" the chief bellowed. "You have not had time to come from them."

The other did not reply; he stood woodenly, staring vacantly into the chief's face, his palm outstretched holding the jade ball. Conan, looking over Yar Afzal's shoulder, murmured something and reached to touch the chief's arm, but as he did so, Yar Afzal, in a paroxysm of anger, struck the man with his clenched fist and felled him like an ox. As he fell, the jade sphere rolled to Yar Afzal's foot, and the chief, seeming to see it for the first time, bent and picked it up. The men, staring perplexedly at their senseless comrade, saw their chief bend, but they did not see what he picked up from the ground.

Yar Afzal straightened, glanced at the jade, and made a motion to thrust it into his girdle.

"Carry that fool to his hut," he growled. "He has the look of a lotus-eater. He returned me a blank stare. I—*aie!*"

In his right hand, moving toward his girdle, he had suddenly felt movement where movement should not be. His voice died away as he stood and glared at nothing; and inside his clenched right hand he felt the quivering of *change*, of *motion*, of *life*. He no longer held a smooth shining sphere in his fingers. And he dared not look; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could not open his hand. His astonished warriors saw Yar Afzal's eyes distend, the color ebb from his face. Then suddenly a bellow

of agony burst from his bearded lips; he swayed and fell as if struck by lightning, his right arm tossed out in front of him. Face down he lay, and from between his opening fingers crawled a spider—a hideous, black, hairy-legged monster whose body shone like black jade. The men yelled and gave back suddenly, and the creature scuttled into a crevice of the rocks and disappeared.

The warriors started up, glaring wildly, and a voice rose above their clamor, a far-carrying voice of command which came from none knew where. Afterward each man there—who still lived—denied that he had shouted, but all there heard it.

"Yar Afzal is dead! Kill the outlander!"

That shout focused their whirling minds as one. Doubt, bewilderment and fear vanished in the uproaring surge of the blood-lust. A furious yell rent the skies as the tribesmen responded instantly to the suggestion. They came headlong across the open space, cloaks flapping, eyes blazing, knives lifted.

CONAN'S action was as quick as theirs. As the voice shouted he sprang for the hut door. But they were closer to him than he was to the door, and with one foot on the sill he had to wheel and parry the swipe of a yard-long blade. He split the man's skull—ducked another swinging knife and gutted the wielder—felled a man with his left fist and stabbed another in the belly—and heaved back mightily against the closed door with his shoulders. Hacking blades were nicking chips out of the jambs about his ears, but the door flew open under the impact of his shoulders, and he went stumbling backward into the room. A bearded tribesman, thrusting with all his fury as Conan sprang back, over-reached and pitched head-first through the doorway. Conan stooped, grasped the slack of his garments and hauled him clear, and slammed the door in the faces of the men who came surging into it. Bones snapped under the impact, and the next instant Conan slammed the bolts into place and whirled with desperate haste to meet the man who sprang from the floor and tore into action like a madman.

Yasmina cowered in a corner, staring in horror as the two men fought back and forth across the room, almost trampling her at times; the flash and clangor of their blades filled the room, and outside the mob clamored like a wolf-pack, hacking deafeningly at the bronze door with their long knives, and dashing huge rocks against it. Somebody fetched a tree trunk, and the door began to stagger under the thunderous assault. Yasmina clasped her ears, staring wildly. Violence and fury within, cataclysmic madness without. The stallion in his stall neighed and reared, thundering with his heels against the walls. He wheeled and launched his hoofs through the bars just as the tribesman, backing away from Conan's murderous swipes, stumbled against them. His spine cracked in three places like a rotten branch and he was hurled headlong against the Cimmerian, bearing him backward so that they both crashed to the beaten floor.

Yasmina cried out and ran forward; to her dazed sight it seemed that both were slain. She reached them just as Conan threw aside the corpse and rose. She caught his arm, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh, you live! I thought—I thought you were dead!"

He glanced down at her quickly, into the pale, upturned face and the wide staring dark eyes.

"Why are you trembling?" he demand-

ed. "Why should you care if I live or die?"

A vestige of her poise returned to her, and she drew away, making a rather pitiful attempt at playing the Devi.

"You are preferable to those wolves howling without," she answered, gesturing toward the door, the stone sill of which was beginning to splinter away.

"That won't hold long," he muttered, then turned and went swiftly to the stall of the stallion.

Yasmina clenched her hands and caught her breath as she saw him tear aside the splintered bars and go into the stall with the maddened beast. The stallion reared above him, neighing terribly, hoofs lifted, eyes and teeth flashing and ears laid back, but Conan leaped and caught his mane with a display of sheer strength that seemed impossible, and dragged the beast down on his forelegs. The steed snorted and quivered, but stood still while the man bridled him and clapped on the gold-worked saddle, with the wide silver stirrups.

Wheeling the beast around in the stall, Conan called quickly to Yasmina, and the girl came, sidling nervously past the stallion's heels. Conan was working at the stone wall, talking swiftly as he worked.

"A secret door in the wall here, that not even the Wazuli know about. Yar Afzal showed it to me once when he was drunk. It opens out into the mouth of the ravine behind the hut. Ha!"

As he tugged at a projection that seemed casual, a whole section of the wall slid back on oiled iron runners. Looking through, the girl saw a narrow defile opening in a sheer stone cliff within a few feet of the hut's back wall. Then Conan sprang into the saddle and hauled her up before him. Behind them the great door groaned like a living thing and crashed in, and a yell rang to the roof as the entrance was instantly flooded with hairy faces and knives in hairy fists. And then the great stallion went through the wall like a javelin from a catapult, and thundered into the defile, running low, foam flying from the bit-rings.

That move came as an absolute surprize to the Wazulis. It was a surprize, too, to those stealing down the ravine. It happened so quickly—the hurricane-like charge of the great horse—that a man in a green turban was unable to get out of the way. He went down under the frantic hoofs, and a girl screamed. Conan got one glimpse of her as they thundered by—a slim, dark girl in silk trousers and a jeweled breast-band, flattening herself against the ravine wall. Then the black horse and his riders were gone up the gorge like the spume blown before a storm, and the men who came tumbling through the wall into the defile after them met that which changed their yells of blood-lust to shrill screams of fear and death.

You will not want to miss the powerful chapters in next month's
WEIRD TALES that tell of the strange happenings on
the Mountain of the Black Seers

The Jest of Warburg Tantavul

By SEABURY QUINN

"You've kept me out thus far, but some day I'll get in, and——"

A tale about an evil old man who reached back from the grave to work his will—a story of Jules de Grandin

WARBURG TANTAVUL was dying. Little more than skin and bones, his face like a mask of parchment drawn drum-tight across his skull, crisscrossed with myriad wrinkles so small and fine and near together that they made shadows instead of lines, he lay propped up with pillows in the big sleigh bed and smiled as though he found the thought of dissolution faintly humorous.

Even in comparatively good health the man was never prepossessing. Now, wasted with disease, that smile of self-sufficient satisfaction mingled with malignant glee upon his face, he was nothing less than hideous. The eyes, which nature gave him, were small, deep-set, and an oddly terrifying shade of yellow; calculating, cruel and ruthless as the yellow orbs of a crafty and ill-natured cat. The mouth, which his own thoughts had fashioned through the years, was wide

and thin-lipped, almost colorless, and even in repose was always tightly drawn against his small and queerly perfect teeth. Now, as he smiled, a flickering light, lambent as the quick reflection of an unseen flame, flared in his yellow eyes, and a hard white line of teeth showed on his lower lip, as though he bit it to hold back a chuckle.

"And you're still determined that you'll marry Arabella?" he asked his son, fixing his sardonic, mocking smile upon the young man's face.

"Yes, Father, but——"

"No buts, my boy"—this time his chuckle came, low and muted, but at the same time sharp and glassy-hard—"no buts. I've told you I'm against the match, and that you'll rue it to your dying day if you should marry her; but"—he paused, and the breath rasped in his wizened throat—"go ahead and marry her, if you will. I've said my say and warned you—heh, heh, my boy, never say your father didn't warn you!"

He lay back on his piled-up pillows for a moment, swallowing convulsively, as though to force the fleeting life-breath back; then, abruptly: "Get out," he ordered. "Get out and stay out, you poor fool; but remember what I've said."

"Father," young Tantavul began, taking a quick step toward the head of the bed, but the look of concentrated fury mixed with hatred which flashed up in the old man's tawny eyes halted him in midstride.

"Get — out — I — said!" his father snarled; then, as the door closed softly on his son:

"Nurse—hand—me—that—picture." His breath was coming slowly, now, in shallow, labored gasps, but the claw-like fingers of his withered hand writhed in a gesture of command, pointing to the silver-framed photograph of a woman which stood upon a little table in the bedroom window-bay.

He clutched the portrait which she handed him as though it were some precious relic, and for a minute let his yellow eyes rove over it. "Lucy," he whispered hoarsely, and now his words were thick and indistinct, "Lucy, they'll be married, 'spite of all that I have said—they'll be married, Lucy—d'ye hear?" Thin and high-pitched as a child's, his voice rose to

● One day back in 1925, Seabury Quinn wrote a story called "The Horror on the Links," which was published in WEIRD TALES for October of that year. The story told of a weird and uncanny mystery that was solved by a mercurial, egotistical yet altogether human and likable French scientist named Jules de Grandin. This strange figure—occultist, phantom-fighter and ghost-breaker, detective and physician, vain yet lovable—at once captured the sympathies of our readers, and also fired the imagination of Mr. Quinn, whose literary creation the little Frenchman is. Since "The Horror on the Links" appeared, this magazine has printed more than fifty stories about the weird exploits of the indomitable little Frenchman, and hopes to print as many more in the future. Month after month, year after year, Jules de Grandin has grown in the affections of the reading public, and his appearance in a new story is welcomed by many thousands of de Grandin fans as occasion for rejoicing. If you have not yet made the acquaintance of this strangest and most astonishing detective of fiction, you now have the opportunity to meet him in this story: "The Jest of Warburg Tantavul."

a shrill and piping treble as he grasped the picture's heavy silver frame and held it level with his face. "They'll be married, Lucy, my dear, and they'll have——"

Abruptly as a penny whistle's note is stilled when no more air is blown in it, old Tantavul's cry was hushed. The picture, still grasped in his hands, fell to the tufted coverlet with a soft and muffled thud, the man's lean jaw relaxed, and he slumped back on his pile of pillows with a shadow of the mocking smile still showing in his glazing eyes.

Etiquette requires that the nurse await the doctor's confirmation at such times; so, obedient to professional dictates, Miss Williamson stood beside the bed until I felt the dead man's pulse and nodded; then, with the skill of years of practise, she began her offices, bandaging the wrists and jaw and ankles, that the body might be ready when the representative of Martin's Funeral Home came to convey it to the operating-room.

2

MY FRIEND de Grandin was annoyed. Arms akimbo, knuckles on hips, forcing back his black-silk kimono till it resembled the outspread wings of an angry bat, he took his stance in the center of the study and voiced his plaint in no uncertain terms. In fifteen little so small minutes he must leave for the theater, and that son and grandson of a pig who was the florist delayed delivery of the gardenia which must grace the left lapel of his evening coat. And was it not indisputably a fact that he could not go forth without a fresh gardenia? But certainly. What was it that the *sale chameau* was thinking of that he thus procrastinated in delivering that unmentionable flower till this unspeakable time of night? He was Jules de Grandin, he, and not to be oppressed by any species of a goat who called himself a florist. But no. It must not be. It should not be, by blue! He, personally, would seek out the vile one and tweak his ears, pull his nose, thump his head most soundly. He would——

"Axin' yer pardon, sor," Nora McGinnis broke in from the study door, "there's a Miss an' Misther Tantavul to see ye, an'——"

"Bid them be gone. Request that they will fill their pockets full of rocks and jump into the bay, say that we will not see——

"Grand Dieu" — he cut his oratory short—*"les enfants dans le bois!"*

Truly, there was something reminiscent of the Babes in the Wood about the couple who had followed Nora to the study. Dennis Tantavul looked even younger and more boyish than I remembered him, and the girl beside him was so childish in appearance that I felt a quick, instinctive pity for her. Plainly they were frightened, too, for they clung together, hand to hand, like frightened children going past a graveyard, and in their eyes was that look of helpless, heartsick terror I had seen so often when blood test and X-ray confirmed preliminary diagnosis of carcinoma.

"Monsieur, Mademoiselle," the little Frenchman gathered his kimono and his dignity about him in a single sweeping gesture as he struck his heels together and bowed stiffly from the hips, "I apologize for my unseemly words. Were it not that I have been subjected to a terrible, calamitous misfortune, I should not so far have forgotten myself as to——"

The girl's quick smile cut through his words. "We understand," she reassured; "we, too, have been through trouble, and have come to see Doctor Trowbridge——"

"Ah? Then I have permission to with-

draw?" He bowed again and turned upon his heel, but I called him back.

"Perhaps you can assist us," I remarked as I introduced the callers.

"The honor is entirely mine, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin told her as he raised her fingers to his lips. "You and *Monsieur* your brother——"

"But he's not my brother," said the girl. "We're cousins. That's why we called on Doctor Trowbridge."

De Grandin tweaked the already needle-sharp points of his little, blond mustache as he looked at her. *"Pardonnez-moi, Mademoiselle,"* he begged; "I have resided in your country but five little years, and perhaps I do not understand the English fluently. It is because you and *Monsieur* are cousins that you come to see the doctor? Me, I am dull and stupid like a pig; I fear I do not comprehend."

Dennis Tantavul replied: "It's not because of the relationship, Doctor—not entirely, at any rate, but because——"

He turned to me, a look of mingled fear and wonder in his eyes. "You were at my father's bedside when he died; you remember what he said about my marrying Arabella?"

I nodded.

"There was something—some ghastly, hidden threat—concealed in his warning," he continued. "It seemed as though he were jeering at me—daring me to marry her, yet——"

"Was there some provision in his will?" I asked, and:

"Yes, sir, there was," the young man answered. "Here it is."

From his pocket he produced a sheet of folded parchment, opened it and indicated a paragraph:

To my son, Dennis Tantavul, I give, devise and bequeath all my property of every kind and sort, real, personal and mixed, of which I may die seized and possessed, or to which I may be entitled, in the event of his marrying Arabella Tantavul, but, should he not marry the said Arabella Tantavul, then it is my will that he receive only one-half of my estate, the residue thereof to go to the said Arabella Tantavul, who has made her home with me since childhood and occupied the relationship of daughter to me.

"H'm," I replied, "that looks as if he really wanted you to marry your cousin, even though——"

"And see here, sir," Dennis interrupted, "here's an envelope we found in Father's papers."

Sealed with red wax, the packet of heavy, opaque parchment was addressed:

To my children, Dennis and Arabella Tantavul, to be opened by them upon the occasion of the birth of their first child.

De Grandin's small blue eyes were snapping with that flickering light they showed when he was interested. "Monsieur Dennis," he said, turning the thick envelope over and over between his small, white hands, "Doctor Trowbridge has told me something of your father's death-bed scene. There is a mystery about this business. My suggestion is you read this message now——"

"No, sir, I won't do that," the young man interrupted. "My father didn't love me—sometimes I think he hated me—but I never disobeyed a wish that he expressed, and I don't feel at liberty to do so now. It would be like breaking faith with the dead. But"—he smiled a trifle shamefacedly—"Father's lawyer, Mr. Bainbridge, is out of town on business, and it will be his duty to probate the will. In the meantime, I'd feel better if the will and envelope were in other hands than mine. So we came to Doctor Trowbridge to ask him to take charge of them till Mr. Bainbridge comes from Washington, and meanwhile——"

"Yes, *Monsieur,* meanwhile?" de Grandin prompted as the young man paused.

"You know human nature, Doctor,"

Dennis turned to me; "no one can see farther into hidden meanings than the man who sees humanity with its mask off, the way a doctor does. Do you think Father might have been delirious when he warned me not to marry Arabella, or——" His voice trailed off to silence, but his troubled eyes were eloquent.

"H'm," I moved uncomfortably in my chair, "I can't see any reason for your hesitation, Dennis. That bequest of all your father's property in the event you married Arabella would seem to indicate his true feelings." I tried to make my words convincing, but the memory of Warburg Tantavul's dying words dinned in my ears. There had been something gloating in his voice as he told the picture that his son and niece would marry.

DE GRANDIN caught the hint of hesitation in my tone. *"Monsieur,"* he asked, "will you not tell us of the antecedents of your father's warning? Doctor Trowbridge is perhaps too near to see the situation clearly. Me, I have no knowledge of your father or your family. You and *Mademoiselle* are strangely like. The will describes her as having lived with you since childhood. Will you kindly tell us how it came about?"

The Tantavuls were, as he said, strangely similar in appearance. Anyone might easily have taken them for twins. Like as two plaster portraits from the same mold were the delicate features of their faces, the small, straight noses, the delicately curved lips, the curling, pale-gold hair. Arabella wore hers in a close-cut bob; Dennis' hair was slightly longer than the average man's. Strip off his dinner clothes and put them on his cousin, encase him in the simple dinner frock she wore, and not one person in a thousand could tell you which was man and which was woman.

Now, once more hand in hand, they sat before us on the sofa, and, as Dennis began speaking, I saw that frightened, haunted look shine once again in their light eyes.

"Do you remember us as children, sir?" he asked me.

"Yes," I answered. "It must have been some twenty years ago they called me out to see you youngsters. You'd just moved into the old Stephens House, and there was a deal of gossip about the strange gentleman from the West with his two little children and his Chinese cook, who greeted all the neighbors' overtures with churlish rebuffs and never spoke to anyone."

"And what did you think of us, sir?"

"Well, I thought you and your sister —as I thought her then—had as fine a case of measles as I'd ever seen."

"How old were we then, do you remember?"

"Oh, you were something like two years; the little girl was half your age, I'd guess."

"And do you remember the next time you saw us?"

"Yes. You were somewhat older then; eight or ten, I'd say. That time it was the mumps. Queer, quiet little shavers you were. I remember I asked you if you thought you'd like a pickle, and you answered: 'No, it hurts.' "

"It did, too, sir. Every day Father made us eat one; stood over us with a whip till we'd chewed and swallowed the last morsel."

"What!"

The young folks nodded solemnly as Dennis answered. "Yes, sir; every day. He said he wanted to check up the progress we were making."

For a moment he was silent; then: "Doctor Trowbridge, if anyone treated you with studied cruelty all your life—if

you'd never had a kind word or gracious act from that person in all your memory, then suddenly that person offered you a favor—made it possible for you to gratify your dearest wish, and threatened to penalize you if you failed to do so, wouldn't you be suspicious? Wouldn't you suspect some sort of dreadful practical joke?"

"I don't think that I quite understand," I answered.

"Very well, then, listen:

"In all my life I can't remember ever having seen my father smile. Not really smile with friendliness, humor or affection, I mean. My life—Arabella's, too—was one long persecution at his hands. I was eighteen months old when we came to Harrisonville, I believe, but I still have vague recollections of our Western home, of a house set high on a hill, overlooking the ocean, and a wall with climbing vines and purple flowers on it, and a pretty lady who would take me in her arms and cuddle me against her breast, and feed me ice-cream from a spoon, sometimes. I have a sort of recollection of a little baby sister in that house, too, but these things are so far back in babyhood that possibly they never really were more than some childish fancy which I built up for myself and which I loved so dearly and so secretly that they finally came to have a kind of reality for me.

"My real memories, the things I can recall with certainty, began with a hurried train trip through hot, dry, uncomfortable country with my father and a strangely silent Chinese servant and a little girl they told me was my cousin Arabella. Little things make big impressions on child-minds, you know, and of all that trip the thing which I remember most is seeing some Indians standing on the platform of a station with pottery and blankets to sell. My father had descended from the car and walked beside the train, and I climbed down after him and tried to run and take his hand. I stumbled over something on the platform and fell and cut my forehead. I called to him for help, but he didn't even turn around, and one of the Indian women lifted me to my feet and wiped the blood from my face with her handkerchief. Then, when the bleeding didn't stop, she tore the handkerchief in half and used it for a bandage. It was the only act of kindness that had been shown me for many a year, and I still have that memento of a savage woman's tenderness somewhere among my childhood's treasures, Doctor.

"Father treated Arabella and me with impartial harshness. We were beaten for the slightest fault; and we had faults a-plenty. If we sat quietly we were accused of sulking and asked why we didn't go and play. If we played and shouted, we were whipped for being noisy little nuisances.

"As we weren't allowed to associate with any of the children in the neighborhood, we made up our own games. I'd be Geraint and Arabella would be Enid of the dove-white feet, or perhaps we'd play that I was Arthur in the Castle Perilous, while she was the kindly Lady of the Lake who gave him back his magic sword. And though we never mentioned it, both of us knew that whatever the adventure was, the false knight I contended with was really my father. But when actual trouble came I wasn't an heroic figure.

"I MUST have been thirteen years old when I had my last thrashing. A little brook ran through the lower part of our land, and the former owners had widened it into a lily-pond. The flowers had died out years before, but the out-

lines of the pool remained, and it was our favorite summer play place. We taught ourselves to swim—not very well, of course, but well enough—and as we had no bathing-suits, we used to go in in our underwear. When we'd finished swimming we'd lie out in the sun until our under-things were dry, then don our outer clothing. One afternoon we were splashing in the water, happy as a pair of baby beavers sporting in the woods, and nearer to shouting with laughter than we'd ever been before, I think, when my father suddenly appeared upon the bank.

" 'Come out o' there!' he ordered me, and there was a kind of sharp, hard dryness in his voice I'd never heard before. 'So that's the shameless way you spend your time behind my back?' he asked as I climbed up the bank. 'In spite of all I've done to keep you decent, you dared to do a thing like this?'

" 'Why, Father, we were only swimming,' I began, but he struck me on the mouth.

" 'Be quiet, you young rake!' he roared. 'I'll teach you.'

"Before I realized his intention he'd cut a willow switch, seized me by the neck and thrust my head between his knees; then, while he held me tight as in a vise, he flogged me with the willow lash until the blood came through the skin and stained my soaking cotton singlet. Then he released me and kicked me back into the pool as a heartless master might abuse a dog.

"As I said, I wasn't an heroic figure. It was Arabella who came to my rescue, helped me up the slippery bank, and took my head upon her shoulder. 'Poor Dennie,' she said. 'Poor, poor Dennie. It was my fault, Dennie dear; I never should have let you take me in the water.' Then she kissed me—it was the first time anyone had kissed me since the pretty lady of my half-remembered dreams — and told me: 'We'll be married, dear, the very day that Uncle Warburg dies, and I'll be so sweet and good to you and you will love me so that we shan't remember any of these cruel things that we have to go through now.'

"We thought my father'd gone away, but he must have stayed to see what we would say; for as Arabella finished speaking he stepped out from behind a clump of rhododendron and then, for the first time, I heard him laugh. 'You'll be married, will you?' he asked jeeringly. 'Well, you'd better not. You'll both wish that the earth had opened and swallowed you if you ever dare to marry.'

"That was the last time he actually struck me, but from that time on he seemed to go out of his way to invent mental torments for us both. We weren't allowed to go to public school, but he had a private tutor, a little rat-faced man named Erickson, come in and give us lessons, and in the evening he would take the book and make us stand before him and recite. If either of us failed to answer promptly when he gave a problem in arithmetic or demanded that we spell a word or conjugate a French or Latin verb, he'd wither us with sarcasm, and always as a finish of his diatribe he'd bring the subject of our marriage up, jeering at us, and hinting at some awful consequence if we went through with what we'd set our hearts upon.

"So, Doctor, you can see," he finished, "why I can't help but suspect that this provision of my father's will is really some sort of horrible practical joke he's planned on us—almost as though he'd planned to force us into a situation which would make it possible for him to laugh at us from the grave."

"I can understand your feelings, boy," I answered, "but——"

" 'But' be baked and roasted in the hottest oven hell possesses!" interrupted Jules de Grandin. "The wicked dead one's funeral is at two tomorrow afternoon, *n'est-ce-pas?*

"*Très bien.* At eight tomorrow evening—or earlier, if it will be convenient —you shall be married. I shall esteem it a favor if you permit that I shall be best man. Doctor Trowbridge will be there to give the bride away, and we shall have a merry time, by blue! You shall go upon a gorgeous honeymoon and learn how sweet the joys of love can be—sweeter for having been so long denied, *pardieu!* And in the meantime we shall keep those papers safe for you, and when your lawyer has returned, I shall see that he receives them in due course.

"You fear the so unpleasant joke? *Mais non,* I think the joke is on the other foot, my friends, and the laugh upon the wicked old one who had thought himself so clever!"

3

WARBURG TANTAVUL was neither widely known nor popular, but the solitude in which he had lived had invested him with mystery; now the bars of reticence were down and the walls of isolation broken, upward of a hundred neighbors, mostly women, gathered in the Martin funeral chapel as the services began. The afternoon sun beat softly through the stained glass windows and glinted upon the polished mahogany of the pews. Here and there it touched upon bright spots of color that marked a flower, a woman's hat or a man's tie. The solemn hush was unbroken save for occasional soft sibilations: "What'd he die of? Did he leave much? Were the two young folks his only heirs?"

Then the burial office: "Lord, Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another . . . for a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday, seeing it is as a watch in the night. . . . Oh teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom . . ."

As the final Amen sounded, one of Mr. Martin's young men glided forward, paused beside the casket for a moment, and made the stereotyped announcement: "Those who wish to say good-bye to Mr. Tantavul may do so at this time."

The grisly rite of passing by the bier dragged on. I would have left the place, for I had no wish to look upon the man's dead face and folded hands; but de Grandin took me firmly by the elbow, held me back until the final curiosity-impelled female had filed past the body, then steered me quickly to the casket.

The little Frenchman paused beside the bier, and it seemed to me there was a hint of irony in the smile that touched the corners of his mouth as he leant forward. "*Eh bien,* my old one; we know a secret, thou and I, *n'est-ce-pas?*" he asked the silent form before us.

I swallowed back an exclamation of dismay. Perhaps it was a trick of the uncertain light, possibly it was one of those ghastly, inexplicable things which every doctor and embalmer meets with sometime in his practise—the effect of desiccation from formaldehyde, the pressure of some tissue gas within the body, or something of the sort—at any rate, as Jules de Grandin spoke the corpse's upper lids drew back the fraction of an inch, revealing slits of yellow eyes, which seemed to glare at us with mingled hate and fury.

"Good heavens; come away!" I begged. "It seemed as if he *looked* at us, de Grandin!"

"*Et puis*—and if he did?" he asked me as we left the chapel. "Me, I damn think that I can trade him look for look, my friend. He was clever, that one, I admit

it; but do not be mistaken, Jules de Grandin is no one's imbecile."

4

THE wedding took place in the rectory of St. Chrysostom's. Robed in stole and surplice, Doctor Bentley glanced benignly from Dennis to Arabella, then to de Grandin and me as he began: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony. . . ." His round and ruddy face grew slightly stern as he continued: "If any man can show just cause why they should not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak or else hereafter for ever hold his peace."

He paused the customary short, dramatic moment, and I thought I saw a hard, grim look spread on Jules de Grandin's face. Very faint and far-off seeming, so faint that we could scarcely hear it, but gaining steadily in strength, there came a high, thin, screaming sound. Curiously, it seemed to me to resemble the long-drawn, wailing shriek of a freight train's whistle heard from miles away upon a still and sultry summer night, weird, wavering and ghastly. Now it seemed to grow in shrillness, though its volume was no greater. High, so high the human ear could scarcely register it, it beat upon our consciousness with a frightful, piercing sharpness. It was like a sick, shrill scream of hellish torment that set the tortured air to quivering till we could not say if we were really hearing it, or if it were but a subjective ringing in our heads.

I saw a look of haunted fright leap into Arabella's eyes, saw Dennis' pale face go paler as the strident whistle sounded shriller and more shrill; then, as it seemed I could endure the stabbing of that needle-sound no longer, it ceased abruptly, giving way to blessed, comforting silence. And through the silence came a peal of chuckling laughter, half breathless, half hysterical, wholly devilish: *Huh—hu-u-uh—hu-u-u-u-uh!* the final syllable drawn out until it seemed almost a groan.

"The wind, Monsieur le Curé, it is the wind," said Jules de Grandin sharply. "Proceed to marry them, if you will be so kind."

"The wind?" Doctor Bentley echoed incredulously. "Why, I could have sworn I heard somebody laugh, but——"

"It is the wind, *Monsieur;* it plays strange tricks at times," the little Frenchman answered, his small, blue eyes as hard as frozen iron. "Proceed, if you will be so kind; we wait on you."

"Forasmuch as Dennis and Arabella have consented to be joined together in holy wedlock . . . I pronounce them man and wife," concluded Doctor Bentley, and de Grandin, ever gallant, kissed the bride upon the lips, and, before we could restrain him, planted kisses upon both of Dennis' cheeks.

"*Parbleu,* I thought that we might have the trouble, for a time," he told me as we left the rectory.

"What *was* that awful, shrieking noise we heard?" I asked.

"It was the wind, my friend," he answered in a hard, flat, toneless voice. "The ten times damned, but wholly ineffectual wind."

5

"SO, THEN, little sinner, weep and wail for the burden of mortality that has befallen thee; weep, wail, cry and breathe, my little wrinkled one! *Ha,* you will not? *Pardieu,* I say you shall!"

Gently, but smartly, Jules de Grandin

spanked the small red infant's small red posterior with the end of a towel wrung out in hot water, and as the smacking impact sounded, the tiny, toothless mouth opened to its fullest compass, and a thin, high, piping squall of protest sounded.

"Ah, that is better, *mon petit ami,*" the little Frenchman chuckled. "One can not learn too soon that one must do as one is told, not as one wishes, in this world which you have entered. Look to him, *Mademoiselle.*" He passed the wriggling, bawling morsel of humanity to the nurse and turned to me as I bent above the table where Arabella Tantavul lay. "How does the mother, good Friend Trowbridge?" he asked.

"U'm'mp," I answered noncommittally, working furiously. "Poor youngster," I added as Arabella, swathed in blankets, was trundled to her room, "she had a pretty tough time of it, but——"

"But in the morning she will have forgotten!" de Grandin cut in with a laugh. "*Ha,* have I not seen it? She will gaze upon the little monkey-thing which I just caused to breathe the breath of life, and vow it is the loveliest of all God's lovely creatures. *Cordieu,* she will hold it at her tender breast and smile on it — she will——

"*Sacré nom d'un rat,* what is that?"

From the nursery where, ensconced in wire trays twenty new-born fragments of humanity slept or squalled, there came a sudden frightened scream—a woman's cry of terror.

We raced along the corridor, reached the glass-walled room and thrust the door back, taking care to open it no wider than was necessary, lest a draft disturb the carefully conditioned air within the place.

Backed against the farther wall, her face gone gray with fright, the nurse in charge was staring at the skylight with horror-widened eyes, and even as we entered she opened her lips to emit another shriek.

"Stop it, *Mademoiselle,* you are disturbing your small charges!" De Grandin seized the horrified girl's shoulder and administered a shake. Then:

"What is it that you saw, *Mademoiselle,*" he asked her in a whisper. "Do not be afraid to speak; we shall respect your confidence—but speak softly."

"It — it was up there!" she pointed with a shaking finger toward the black square of the skylight. "They'd just brought Baby Tantavul in and I'd laid him in his crib when I thought I heard somebody laughing. Oh" — she shuddered at the recollection—"it was awful! Not really a laugh, but something more like a long-drawn-out hysterical groan. Did you ever hear a child tickled to exhaustion—how he moans and gasps for breath and laughs, all at once? I think the fiends in hell must laugh like that!"

"Yes, yes, we understand," de Grandin nodded shortly, "but tell us, if you please, what happened next?"

"I looked around the nursery, but I was all alone here with the babies. Then it came again, louder, this time, and seemingly right above me. I looked up at the skylight, and—there it was!

"It was a face, sir—just a face, with no body to it, and it seemed to float in mid-air, just above the glass, then to dip down against it, like a child's balloon drifting in the wind, and it looked right past me down at Baby Tantavul and laughed again."

"A face, *Mademoiselle,* did you say——"

"Yes, sir, a face—the most awful face I've ever seen. It was thin and wrinkled, and shriveled like a mummy, and its long, gray hair hung down across its forehead, and its eyes were yellow—like a cat's!—and as they looked at Baby Tan-

tavul they seemed to stretch and open till the white of the balls glared all round the yellow irises, and the mouth opened, not widely, but as though it were chewing something that it relished—and it gave that dreadful, cackling, jubilating laugh again. That's it! I couldn't think before, but it seemed as if that bodiless head were laughing with a sort of evil triumph, Doctor de Grandin!"

"H'm," the little Frenchman tweaked his tightly waxed mustache. "I should not wonder if it did, *Mademoiselle.*"

He turned to me, and: "Stay with her, if you please, my friend," he ordered. "I shall see the supervisor and have her send another nurse to keep her company. I shall request a special watch for the small Tantavul. I do not think that there is any danger, but—mice do not play where cats are wakeful."

"Isn't he just lovely?" Arabella Tantavul looked up from the small knob of hairless flesh which rested on her breast, and ecstasy was in her eyes. "I don't believe I ever saw so beautiful a baby!"

"*Tiens, Madame,* his voice is excellent, at any rate," de Grandin answered with a grin, "and from what one may observe, his appetite is excellent, as well."

Arabella smiled and patted the small creature's back. "You know, I never had a doll in all my life," she told us. "Now I've got this dear little mite, and I'm going to be so happy with him. Oh, I wish Uncle Warburg were alive; I know this darling baby would soften even his hard heart.

"But I mustn't say such things about him, must I? He really wanted Dennis and me to marry, didn't he? His will proved that. You think he wanted us to marry, Doctor?"

"I am persuaded that he did, *Madame.* Your marriage was his dearest wish, his fondest hope," de Grandin answered solemnly.

"I felt that way, too. He was harsh and cruel to us while we were growing up, and preserved his stony-hearted attitude to the end, but underneath it all there must have been some hidden streak of kindness, some lingering affection for Dennis and me, or he'd never have put that clause into his will——"

"Nor have left this memorandum for you," de Grandin interrupted, drawing from an inner pocket the parchment envelope which Dennis had given him the day before his father's funeral.

The youthful mother started back as though he menaced her with a live scorpion, and instinctively her arms closed protectively about the baby at her breast.

"The—that—letter?" she faltered, her breath coming in short, smothered gasps. "I'd forgotten it. Oh, Doctor de Grandin, burn it. Don't let me see what's in it. I'm afraid!"

It was a bright May morning, without sufficient breeze to stir the budding leaflets on the maple trees outside, but as de Grandin held the letter out I thought I heard the sudden rustle of a wind beyond the window, not loud, but shrewd and keen, like wind among the graveyard evergreens in autumn, and, curiously, there was a note of soft, malicious laughter mingled with it.

The little Frenchman heard it too, and for an instant he looked toward the window, and I thought I saw the flicker of an ugly sneer take form beneath the ends of his mustache.

"Open it, *Madame,*" he bade. "It is for you and Monsieur Dennis, and little *Monsieur Bébé* here."

"No-o; I daren't——"

"*Très bien,* then Jules de Grandin does!" Drawing out his penknife he slit

the heavy envelope, pressed suddenly against its ends, so that its sides bulged out, and dumped its contents on the counterpane. Ten twenty-dollar bills dropped on the coverlet. And nothing else.

"Two hundred dollars!" Arabella gasped. "Why——"

"As a birthday gift for *petit* Monsieur Dennis, one surmises," de Grandin smiled. "*Eh bien,* the old one had a sense of humor underneath his ugly outward shell, it seems. He kept you on the tenterhooks lest the message in this envelope were one of evil import, while all the time it was a present of congratulation."

"But such a gift from Uncle Warburg —I can't understand it!" Arabella murmured wonderingly.

"Perhaps it is as well, *Madame,*" he answered as we rose to go. "Be happy with the gift, and give your ancient uncle credit for at least one act of kindliness. *Au 'voir.*"

"HANGED if I can understand it either," I told him as we left the hospital. "If that old curmudgeon had left a message berating them for fools for having offspring, it would have been more in character, but such a gift—well, I'm surprized."

Amazingly, de Grandin halted in midstride and laughed until the tears rolled down his face. "*Parbleu,* my friend," he told me when he managed to regain his breath, "I do not think that your surprize is half so great as that of Monsieur Warburg Tantavul!"

6

DENNIS TANTAVUL regarded me with misery-haunted eyes. "I just can't understand it," he admitted. "It's all so sudden, so utterly——"

"*Pardonnez-moi,*" de Grandin interrupted from the door of the consulting-room, "I could not help but hear your last remark, and if it is not an intrusion——"

"Not at all," the young man answered. "I'd like the benefit of your advice. It's Arabella, and I'm dreadfully afraid that she——"

"*Non,* do not try it, *mon ami,*" de Grandin warned. "Do you give us the symptoms, let us make the diagnosis. He who acts as his own doctor has a fool for a patient, you know."

"Well, then, here are the facts: This morning Arabella woke me up, crying as though her heart would break. I asked her what the trouble was, and she looked at me as if I were a stranger—no, not exactly that, rather as if I were some dreadful thing she'd suddenly discovered lying by her side. Her eyes were positively round with horror, and when I tried to take her in my arms and comfort her she shrank away as though I were infected with the plague.

" 'Oh, Dennie, don't!' she begged, and positively cringed away from me. Then she sprang out of bed, and drew her kimono about her as though she were ashamed to have me see her in pajamas, and ran sobbing from the room.

"Presently I heard her crying in the nursery, and went down there to try and comfort her——" He paused, and tears started to his eyes. "She was standing by the crib where little Dennis lay, looking at him with tears streaming down her cheeks, and in her hand she held a long, sharp steel letter-opener. 'Poor little mite; poor little flower of unpardonable sin,' she said. 'We've got to go, Baby darling; you to limbo, I to hell—oh, God wouldn't, *couldn't* be so cruel as to damn you for your parents' sin!—but we'll all three suffer torment endlessly, because we didn't know!'

"She raised the knife to plunge it in

the little fellow's heart, and he stretched his baby hands out and laughed and cooed as the sunlight glinted on the deadly steel.

"I was on her in an instant, wrenching the knife from her with one hand, holding her against me with the other, but she fought me off.

" 'Don't touch me, Dennie, please, *please* don't!' she begged. 'I know it's deadly sin, but I love you so, my dear, that I can't resist you if I let you put your arms around me.'

"I tried to kiss her, but she hid her face against my shoulder and moaned as if in pain when she felt my lips against her neck. Then she went suddenly limp in my arms, and I carried her, unconscious but moaning pitifully, into her sitting-room and laid her on the couch. I left Sarah, the nurse maid, with her, giving strict orders not to let her leave the room till I returned. Can't you come over right away?"

De Grandin's cigarette had burned down till it threatened his mustache, and in his small, blue eyes was such a look of murderous rage as I had not seen for years. *"Bête!"* he murmured savagely. *"Sale chameau;* species of stinking goat! This is his doing, or Jules de Grandin is a lop-eared fool! Come, my friends, let us rush, hasten, fly; I would talk with Madame Arabella!"

"NAW, suh, she's gone," the colored nurse-maid told us when we asked for Arabella. "Master Dennie started ter squeal sumpin awful right after Mistu Dennis lef', an' Ah knowed it wuz time fo' 'is breakfas', so Mis' Arabella wuz lying' nice an' still on th' sofa, an' Ah says to her, Ah says, 'Yuh lay still, dere, now honey, whilst Ah goes an' sees after yo baby; so Ah goes down ter th' nussery an' fixes 'im all up, an' carries 'im back ter th' settin'-room where Miss' Arabella wuz, an' she ain't dere no mo'. Naw, suh."

"I thought I told you——" Dennis began furiously, but de Grandin laid a hand upon his arm.

"Softly, if you please, *Monsieur,*" he soothed. *"La bonne* did wisely, though she knew it not; she was with the small one all the while, so no harm could come to him. Was it not better so, after what you witnessed in the morning?"

"Ye-es," the other grudgingly admitted. "I suppose so. But Arabella——"

"Let us see if we can find a trace of her," the Frenchman interrupted. "Look, do you miss her clothing?"

Dennis looked about the pretty, chintz-hung room. "Yes," he decided as he finished his inspection; "her dress was on that lounge, and her shoes and stockings on the floor beneath it. They're all gone."

"So," de Grandin nodded. "Distrait as she appeared to be, it is unlikely she would have stopped to dress had she not planned on going out.

"Friend Trowbridge, will you kindly call Police Headquarters, inform them of the situation, and ask to have all exits to the city watched?"

As I picked up the telephone he and Dennis started on a room-by-room inspection of the house.

"Find anything?" I asked as I hung up the 'phone after notifying headquarters.

"Cordieu, I should damn say yes!" de Grandin answered as I joined them in the upstairs living-room. "Look yonder, if you please, my friend."

The room was obviously the intimate apartment of the house. Electric lamps under painted shades were placed beside the big leather-upholstered chairs, ivory-enameled bookshelves lined the walls to a height of four feet or so, upon their

tops was a litter of gay, unconsidered little trifles—cinnabar cigarette boxes, bits of hammered brass. Old china, blue and red and purple, glowed mellowly in cabinets of mahogany, its colors catching up and accentuating the muted blues and reds of an antique Hamadan carpet. A Paisley shawl was draped scarfwise across the baby grand piano in the corner.

Directly opposite the door a carven crucifix was standing on the bookcase top. It was an exquisite bit of Italian work, the cross of ebony, the corpus of old ivory, and so perfectly executed that, though it was a scant four inches high, one could note the tense, tortured muscles, the straining throat which overfilled with groans of agony, the brow all knotted and bedewed with the cold sweat of torment. Upon the statue's thorn-crowned head, where it made a bright, iridescent halo, was a band of gem-encrusted platinum, a woman's diamond-studded wedding ring.

"*Hélas,* it is love's crucifixion!" whispered Jules de Grandin.

THREE months went by, and though we kept the search up unremittingly, no trace of Arabella could be found. Dennis Tantavul installed a full-time, highly trained and recommended nurse in his desolate house, and spent his time haunting police stations and newspaper offices. He aged a decade in the ninety days since Arabella left; his shoulders stooped, his footsteps lagged, and a look of never-ending misery dwelt within his eyes as he trod his daily *Via Dolorosa,* a prematurely old and broken man.

"It's the most uncanny thing I ever saw," I said to Jules de Grandin as we walked through Forty-second Street toward the West Shore Ferry. We had gone over to New York for some surgical supplies, and I do not drive my car in the metropolis. Truck chauffeurs there are far too careless and repair bills for wrecked mudguards far too high. "How a full-grown woman could evaporate that way is something I can't understand," I added as we stepped briskly through the bracing autumn air. "If it had happened twenty years ago there might be some excuse for it, but today, with our radio police-call systems and all the other modern——"

"*S-s-st,*" his sibilated admonition cut me short. "That woman there, my friend, observe her, if you please." He nodded toward a female figure twenty feet ahead of us.

I looked, and wondered at his sudden interest in the draggled hussy.

She was dressed in tawdry finery much the worse for wear. Sleazy silken skirt was much too tight, cheap fur jaquette far too short and snug; high heels of her satin slippers shockingly run over, make-up plastered on her cheeks and lips and eyes, and her short black hair fairly bristled with untidiness beneath the rim of her abbreviated hat. Written unmistakably upon her was the nature of her calling, the oldest and least honorable profession known to womanhood.

"Well?" I answered tartly. "What possible interest can you have in a——"

"Do not walk so fast," he whispered as his fingers closed upon my arm, "and do not raise your voice. I would that we should follow her, but I do not wish that she should know."

The neighborhood was far from savory, and I felt uncommonly conspicuous as we turned from Forty-second Street into Eleventh Avenue in the wake of the young strumpet, followed her provocatively swaying hips down two malodorous blocks, finally paused as she went in the doorway of a filthy, unkempt "rooming-house."

With de Grandin in the lead, stepping softly as a pair of cats, we trailed the woman through the dimly lighted, barren hall and up a flight of shadowy, uncarpeted stairs. We climbed two further flights, the last one letting into a sort of little oblong foyer bounded on one end by the stair-well, on the farther extremity by a barred and very dirty window, and on each side by two sets of sagging, paint-blistered doors. On each of these was pinned a card, handwritten with the many flourishes dear to the chirography of the professional card-writer who still does business in the poorer quarters of our great cities. The air was heavy with the odor of cheap whisky, stale bacon and fried onions.

We made a hasty circuit of the hall, studying the cardboard labels. On the farthest door the notice read MISS SIEGLINDE.

"Mon Dieu," exclaimed de Grandin, *"le mot propre!"*

"Eh?" I answered, puzzled.

"Sieglinde, do you not recall her?"

"No-o, I can not say I do. The only Sieglinde I remember is the character in Wagner's *Die Walküre* who unwittingly became her brother's mistress and——"

"Précisément. Let us enter, if you please." Without pausing to knock, he turned the handle of the door and stepped across the threshold of the squalid room.

The woman sat upon the bed, her hat pushed backward from her brow, a cracked and dirty tumbler in one hand, a whisky bottle poised above it. "Get out!" she ordered thickly. "Get out o' here—I don't want——" A gasp cut short her utterance, and she turned her head away. Then:

"Get t'ell out o' here, you lousy rummies!" she half screamed. "Who d'ye think you are, breakin' into a lady's room like this? Get out, or——"

De Grandin eyed her steadily, and, as her strident order wavered:

"Madame Arabella, we have come to take you home," he told her softly.

"Good Lord, man, you're crazy!" I exclaimed. "Arabella? This——"

"Precisely, my good friend; this is Madame Arabella Tantavul, whom we have sought these many months in vain."

Crossing the room in two quick strides he seized the cringing woman by the shoulders and turned her face up to the window. I looked, and felt a sudden swift attack of nausea.

He was right. Thin to emaciation, her face already lined with the deep-bitten scars of dissipation, the woman on the bed was Arabella Tantavul, though the shocking change wrought in her features and the black dye in her hair had disguised her so I never would have recognized her.

"We have come to take you home, *ma pauvre,"* he repeated. "Your husband——"

"My husband?" Her reply was half a scream. "Oh, dear God, as if I had a husband——"

"And a little one who needs you," the Frenchman interrupted. "You can not leave him so, *Madame*——"

"I can't? Ah, that's where you're mistaken, Doctor. I can never see him again, in this world or the next. Please, please, go away and forget you found me, or I'll have to drown myself—I've tried it twice already, but my courage failed. But if you try to take me back, or tell Dennis that you saw me——"

"Tell me, *Madame,"* he broke in, "was not your flight caused by a visitation from the dead?"

HER faded brown eyes widened. "How did you know?" she asked.

"Tiens, one may make surmises," he

replied. "Will you not tell us just what happened? I think there is a way out of your difficulties."

"There isn't any way," she muttered dully, and her head sank listlessly upon her chest. "He planned his work too well; all that's left for me is death—and damnation afterward."

"But if there were a way—if I could show it to you?"

"Can you repeal the laws of God?"

"I am a very clever person; perhaps I can discover an evasion, if not an absolute repeal. Now, tell me: how and when did *Monsieur* your late but not lamented uncle, come to you?"

"The night before—before I went away. I woke up about midnight, thinking I heard a cry from Dennie's nursery. I rose to go to him, and when I reached the room where he was sleeping I saw my uncle's face glaring at me through the window. It seemed to be illuminated by a sort of inward, hellish light, for it stood out against the darkness like a jack-o'-lantern, and it smiled an awful smile at me. 'Arabella,' it said, and I could see its thin, dead lips writhe back as though its teeth were burning-hot, 'I've come to tell you that your marriage is a mockery and a lie. The man you married is your brother, and the child you bore is doubly illegitimate. You can't continue living with them, Arabella. That would be an even greater sin than the one you have committed. You must leave them; leave them right away, or'—once more his lips crept back until his teeth were bare—'or I shall come to visit you each night, and when the baby has grown old enough to understand, I'll tell him of his parents' sin. Take your choice, my dear. Leave them and let me go back to my grave in peace, or stay and see me every night, and know that I will tell your son when he is old enough to understand. And if I do it he'll loathe and hate you for the things you are, and curse the day you bore him.'

"'And you'll promise never to come near Dennis or the baby if I go?' I asked.

"He promised, and I staggered back to bed, where I fell fainting.

"Next morning when I wakened I was sure that it had been a dream, but when I looked at Dennis and my own reflection in the glass, I knew it was no dream, but a dreadful visitation from the dead.

"It was then that I went mad. I tried to kill my baby, and when Dennis stopped me I watched my chance to run away, came over to New York and took to this." She looked significantly around the miserably furnished room. "I knew they'd never look for Arabella Tantavul among the sisters of the pavement; I was safer from pursuit right here than if I'd been in Europe or in China."

"But *Madame*"—de Grandin's voice was vibrant with shocked reproof—"that which you saw was nothing but a dream; a most unpleasant dream, I grant, but still a dream. Look in my eyes, *Madame!*"

She raised her eyes to his, and I saw his pupils widen, as a cat's do in the dark, saw a line of white outline the cornea, and, responsive to his piercing gaze, beheld her brown eyes set in a fixed stare, first as though in fright, then with a glaze almost like that of death.

"Attend me, Madame Arabella," he commanded softly. "You are tired—*grand Dieu*, how tired you are! You have suffered greatly, but you are about to rest. Your memory of that night is gone; so is all memory of all things which have occurred since. You will move and eat and sleep as you are bidden, but of what takes place until I bid you wake you will retain no recollection. Do you hear me, Madame Arabella?"

"I hear," she answered softly, in a small, tired voice.

"Bien. Lie down, my little poor one. Lie down, rest and dream; dream happy dreams of love. Sleep, rest; dream and forget.

"Will you be good enough to 'phone to Doctor Wyckoff?" he asked me. "We shall place her in his sanitarium, wash this *sacré* dye out of her hair and nurse her back to health; then, when all is ready, we can bear her home and have her take up life—and love—where she left off. None shall be the wiser. This chapter in her life is closed and sealed for ever.

"Each day I'll call upon her and renew hypnotic treatments that she may simulate the mild but curable mental case which we shall tell the good Wyckoff she is. When finally I release her from hypnosis, her mind will be entirely cleared of that bad dream which nearly wrecked her happiness."

7

ARABELLA TANTAVUL lay upon the sofa in her charming upstairs living-room, an orchid negligée trimmed in white marabou about her slender shoulders, an eiderdown rug tucked around her feet and knees. Her wedding ring was once more on her finger. Pale with a pallor not to be disguised by the most skilfully applied cosmetics, and with deep violet circles underneath her amber eyes, she lay back listlessly, drinking in the cheerful warmth which emanated from the fire of apple-logs that snapped and crackled on the hearth. Two months of rest in Doctor Wyckoff's sanitarium had erased the marks of dissipation from her face; even as the skilled ministrations of beauticians had restored the yellow luster to her pale-gold hair, but the listlessness which followed her complete breakdown was still upon her like the weakness from a fever.

"I can't remember anything about my illness, Doctor Trowbridge," she told me with a weary little smile, "but vaguely I connect it with some dreadful dream I had. And"—she wrinkled her smooth forehead in an effort at remembrance—"I think I had a rather dreadful dream last night, but——"

"Ah-ha?" de Grandin leant abruptly forward in his chair, his little mustache twitching like the whiskers of an irritated tom-cat. "What was it that you dreamed?"

"I—don't—know," she answered slowly. "Odd, isn't it, how you can remember that a dream was so unpleasant, but can't recall its details? Somehow, I connect Uncle Warburg with it, but——"

"Parbleu, your uncle? Again? *Ah bah,* he makes me to be so mad, that one!"

"IT IS time we went, my friend," de Grandin told me as the tall clock in the hall beat out its tenth deliberate stroke; "we have important duties to perform."

"For goodness' sake," I protested, "where are you going at this time of night?"

"Where but to Monsieur Tantavul's?" he answered with a smile that had small humor in it. "I am expectant of a visitor tonight and—we must be ready for him."

When he was in a mood like this I knew that questioning would be a waste of breath; accordingly I drove him to the Tantavuls' in silence, knowing he would have an explanation when he deemed the time had come.

"Is Madame Arabella sleeping?" he asked as Dennis met us in the hall.

"Yes, like a baby," answered the young husband. "I've been sitting by her all evening, and I don't believe she's even turned in bed."

"And did you keep the window closed, as I requested?"

"Yes, sir; closed and latched."

"*Bien.* Await us here, *mon brave;* we shall rejoin you presently."

He led the way to Arabella's bedroom, removed the wrappings from a bulky parcel, and displayed the object thus disclosed with the air of a magician about to do a trick. "You see him?" he demanded proudly. "Is he not a beauty?"

"Why—what the deuce?—it's nothing but a window-screen," I answered.

"Ah, but it is made of copper," he informed me, as though explaining something of inordinate importance.

"Well——"

"Well? *Pardieu,* I shall say it is well; it is very exceedingly well, my friend. Observe him, how he works."

From his kit bag he produced a reel of insulated wire, an electrical transformer and a set of tools. Working quickly, he passe-partouted the screen's wooden frame with electrician's tape, then plugged a wire into a near-by lamp socket, connected it with the transformer, and from the latter led a double strand of cotton-wrapped wire to the screen. This he clipped firmly to the copper meshes and led a third wire to the metal grille of the heat register. Last of all, he filled a bulb-syringe with water and sprayed the screen from it, repeating the dousings till the woven copper sparkled like a cobweb in the morning sun. "Now, *Monsieur le Revenant,* I damn think we are ready for you," he announced, surveying his handiwork with every sign of satisfaction.

We waited quietly for something like an hour; then de Grandin rose and bent above the bed where Arabella slept.

"*Madame!*"

The girl stirred faintly, murmuring some half-audible response, and:

"In half an hour you will rise," he told her in a low, insistent voice. "You will put on your robe and stand before the window, but on no account will you go near it or lay hands on it. Should anyone address you from outside, you will reply, but you will not remember what you say or what is said to you."

He motioned me to follow him, and we left the room, taking station in the hallway just outside.

How long we waited I have no idea. Perhaps it was an hour, perhaps less; at any rate, the silent vigil seemed unending, and I raised my hand to stifle a tremendous yawn, when:

"Yes, Uncle Warburg, I can hear you," we heard Arabella saying softly in the room beyond the door.

We tiptoed to the entry: Arabella Tantavul stood before the window, looking fixedly at its darkened square, and beyond her, framed in the window-casing as a masterpiece of horror might be framed for exhibition, glared the face of Warburg Tantavul.

It was dead, there was no doubt about it. In the sunken cheeks, the pinched-in nose and the yellowish-gray skin there showed the evidence of death and early putrefaction, but dead though it was, it was also animated with a dreadful sort of life. The eyes were glaring horribly, as though illuminated with some inward phosphorescence, and they bulged forward in their sunken sockets as though a throttling hand were clutching at the dead thing's throat. The lips were red—red as rouge—but they were not red with life; they were dead, and painted with fresh blood.

"You hear me, do ye?" he demanded, and the ruddy, foam-flecked lips writhed across his yellow teeth. "Then listen, girl; you broke your bargain with me,

now I'm come to keep my threat: Every time you kiss your husband"—a shriek of bitter laughter cut his words, and his staring, starting eyes half closed with hellish merriment—"or the child you love so well, my shadow will be on you. You've kept me out thus far, but some day I'll get in, and——"

Once more the foam-dyed lips writhed across the gleaming teeth, and the lean, dead jaw dropped downward, then snapped up, as though it champed on living flesh; then, suddenly, the whole expression of the corpse-face changed. Surprize, incredulous delight, anticipation, as before a feast, were pictured on it. "Why"—its cachinnating laughter sent a chill down my spine—"why, you're window's open now! You've changed the screen, and I can enter!"

Slowly, like a child's balloon stirred by a vagrant wind, the dreadful face moved closer to the window, and I noted with a nauseated start that it was bodiless. Closer, closer to the screen it came, and Arabella Tantavul gave ground before it, shuddering with nameless dread, putting up her hands to shield her eyes from the laughing thing which menaced her.

"Sapristi," swore de Grandin softly, his fingers clenched about my elbow till they numbed my arm. "Come on, my old and evil one; come a little nearer; only one so little tiny step, and——"

The dead thing floated closer. Now its mocking mouth and shriveled, pointed nose were pressing against the screen; now they seemed to filter through the copper meshes like a wisp of fog——

There came a blinding flash of blue-white flame, the cracking, sputtering gush of fusing metal, a wild, despairing shriek which ended ere it fairly started in a sob of mortal torment, and the sharp and acrid odor of burned flesh!

"Arabella—darling—is she all right?" Dennis Tantavul came charging up the stairs. "I thought I heard a scream——"

"You did, *Monsieur,*" de Grandin answered, "but I do not think that you will ever hear its repetition, unless you are so unfortunate as to go to hell when your earthly pilgrimage is ended."

"What was it?" began Dennis, but de Grandin stopped him with a smile.

"One who thought himself a clever jester pressed his jest a bit too far," he answered enigmatically. "Meantime, look to *Madame* your wife. See how peacefully she lies upon her bed. Her time for evil dreams is past, my friend. Be kind to her, do not forget that a woman loves to have a lover, even though he is her husband." He bent and kissed the sleeping girl upon the brow, and:

"Au 'voir, my little lovely one," he murmured. Then, to me:

"Come, Trowbrdige, my good friend. Our work is finished here; let us leave them to their happiness."

8

JULES DE GRANDIN poured an ounce or so of Couvoisier into a lotus-bud shaped brandy sniffer and passed the goblet back and forth beneath his nose, inhaling the rich fragrance of the brandy. *"Morbleu,* old Omar had it right," he told me with a grin; "what is it that the distillers buy one-half so precious as the stuff they sell?"

"And when you get through misquoting poetry, perhaps you'll deign to tell me what it's all about?" I countered.

"Perhaps I shall," he answered. "Attend me, if you please: You will recall that this annoying Monsieur Who Was Dead Yet Not Dead appeared several times and grinned most horribly through the window? Through the window, please remember. At the hospital, where he near-

ly caused the *garde-malade* to have a fit, he laughed and mouthed at her through the glass skylight, which was tightly closed. When he first appeared and threatened Madame Arabella, he also spoke to her through the window, and——"

"But the window was open," I protested.

"Yes, but screened," he answered with a smile. "Screened with iron, if you please."

"What difference did that make? Tonight I saw him force his features partway through the screen——"

"Précisément," he agreed. "But it was a screen of copper; I saw to that."

Then, seeing my bewilderment: "Iron is of all metals the most earthy," he explained. "It and its derivative, steel, are so instinct with the essence of the earth that creatures of the spirit world can not abide its presence. The legends tell us that when Solomon's Temple was constructed no tool of iron was employed, because even the friendly spirits whose help he had enlisted could not perform their tasks in close proximity to iron. The werewolf, a most unpleasant sort of creature which is half a demon, can be slain by a sword or spear of steel. The witch can be detected by the pricking of an iron pin—never by a pin of brass.

"Very well. When first I thought about this evil dead one's reappearances, I noted that each time he stared outside the window. Glass, apparently, he could not pass—and glass contains a modicum of iron. Iron window-wire stopped him. 'He are not a ghost, then,' I inform me. 'They are things of spirit only, they are thoughts made manifest. This one is a thing of hate, but also of some physical material as well; he is composed in part of the emanations from that body which lies in the tomb and for which the Devil of hell and the devils of decay fight, each for their due shares. *Voilà,* if he have physical properties, he can be destroyed by physical means.'

"And so I set my trap. I procure a screen of copper, through which he could make entrance to the house — but I charged it with electricity—I increase the potential of the current with a step-up transformer, to make assurance doubly sure—and then I wait for him to try to enter, and electrocute himself."

"But is he really destroyed?" I asked dubiously.

"As the candle-flame when one has blown on it," he replied. "He was—how do you say it?—short-circuited. No convict in the chair at Sing Sing ever died more thoroughly than that one did tonight, my friend."

"It seems queer, though, he should have come back from the grave to haunt those two poor kids and break up their marriage, when he really wanted it," I murmured wonderingly.

"Wanted it?" he echoed. *"Ha,* yes, he wanted it as the hunter wants the bird to step within his snare."

"But he gave them such a handsome present when little Dennis was born——"

"Oh, my good, kind, trusting friend, are you, too, deceived?" he laughed.

"Deceived——"

"But certainly. That money which I gave to Madame Arabella was my own. I put it in that envelope."

"Then what was in the message which he really left?"

The little Frenchman sobered suddenly. "It was a dreadful thing, that wicked jest he played on them," he told me solemnly. "The night that Monsieur Dennis left that packet with me I determined that the old one meant him injury; so, when he went, I steamed the package open and destroyed Monsieur Warburg's

message from it. In it he made plain the things which Dennis thought that he remembered.

"Long and long ago Monsieur Tantavul lived in San Francisco. His wife was seven years his junior, and a pretty, joyous thing she was. She bore him two fine children, a little boy and girl, and on them she bestowed the love which he could not appreciate. His business took him often from the city, but when he went away he set a watch on her.

"*Ha,* the eavesdropper seldom hears good tidings of himself, and he who spies on others often wishes that he did not so. His surliness, his evil temper, his reproaches without praise, had driven her to seek release. She met and loved another man, and though she shrank from seeking freedom in that way, at last she yielded to his importunities, and was ready to escape, when Master Bluebeard-Tantavul suddenly returned.

"*Eh bien,* but he had planned a pretty scheme of vengeance! His baby girl he spirited away, gave her for keeping to some Mexicans, then told his wife his plan: He would bring the children up as strangers to each other, and when they grew to full estate he would marry them and keep their consanguinity a secret till they had a child, then break the dreadful truth to them. Thereafter they would live on, bound together for their children's sake, and fearing the world's censure; their consciences would cause them ceaseless torment, and the very love which they had for each other would be like fetters forged of white-hot steel, binding them in a prison-house from which there offered no release.

"When he had told her this his wife went mad, and, heartless as a devil out of hell, he thrust her into an institution, left her there to die, and took his babies with him, moving to New Jersey, and permitting them to grow to manhood and womanhood together, ceaselessly striving to guide them toward the altar, knowing always that his vengeance would be sated when his vile design had been accomplished."

"But, great heavens, man, they're brother and sister!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Perfectly," he answered coolly. "They are also husband and wife, and father and mother."

"But—but——" I stammered, utterly at a loss for words.

"But me no buts, good friend," he bade. "I know what you would say. Their child? *Ah bah;* consider: Did not the kings of ancient times repeatedly take their own sisters to wife, and were not their offspring sound and healthy? But certainly. Did not both Darwin and Wallace fail to find foundation for the doctrine that cross-breeding between healthy people with clean blood is productive of inferior offspring? Look at the little Monsieur Dennis. Were you not blinded by your silly training and tradition — did you not know his parents' near relationship — you would have no hesitation in pronouncing him an unusually fine and healthy child.

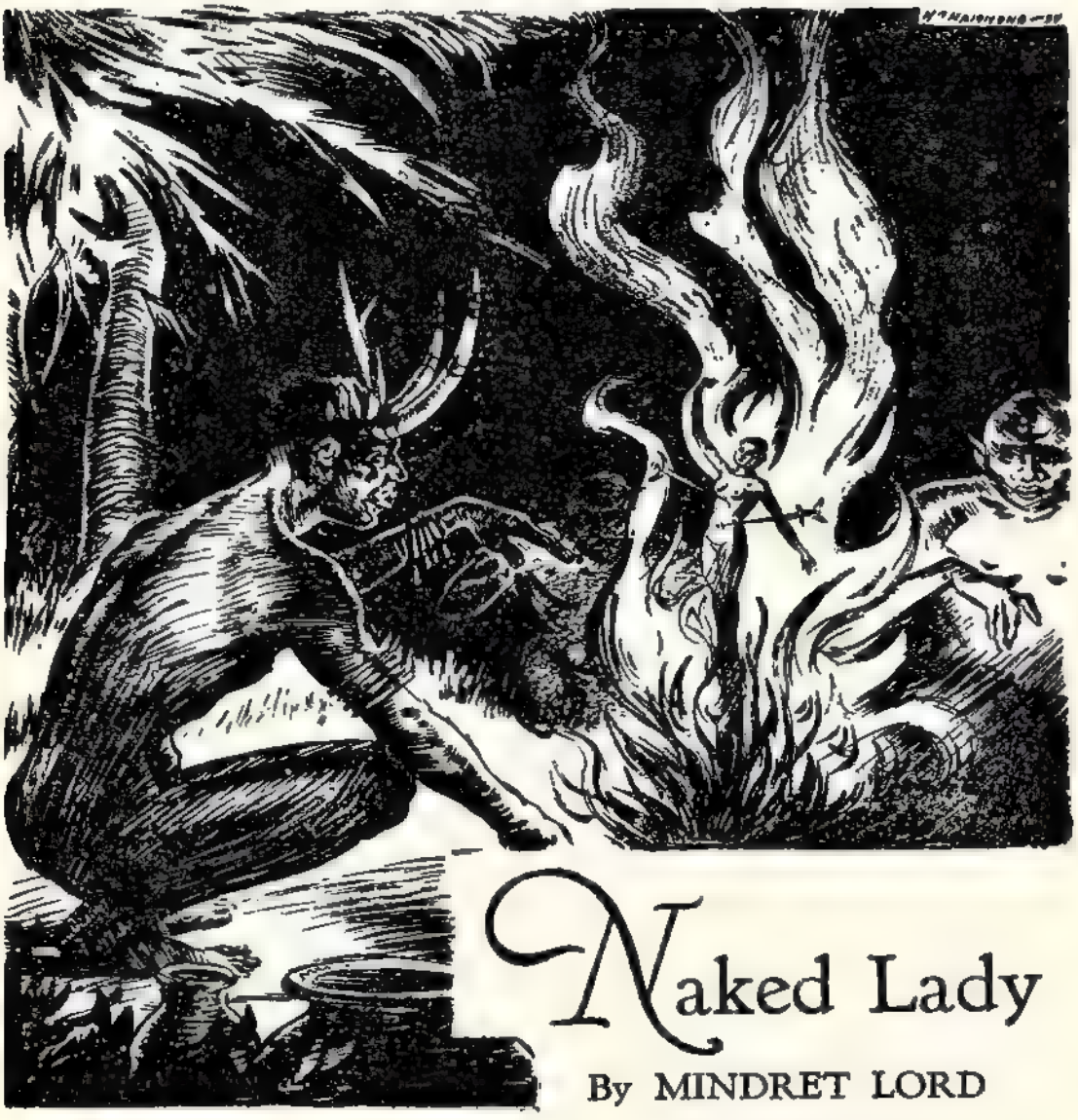
"Besides," he added earnestly, "they love each other, not as brother and sister, but as man and woman. He is her happiness, she is his, and little Monsieur Dennis is the happiness of both. Why destroy this joy—*le bon Dieu* knows they earned it by a joyless childhood!—when I can preserve it for them by simply keeping silent?"

"But——"

"But what you have learned you learned under the seal of your profession," he warned me solemnly. "You can not tell. I will not.

"Meantime" — he poured himself another drink—"I thirst."

"Twenty—thirty years ago—a night in the Haitian jungle—when was it?"



Naked Lady

By MINDRET LORD

This is not a sex story, but is an ingenious tale of West Indian voodoo and a millionaire's strange scheme for vengeance on the actress whom he had married

MARION VAN ORTON finished packing her dressing-case, opened her purse to make sure that her steamer tickets were still there, took one last look in the mirror and then descended the wide, polished staircase of the Van Orton mansion for the last time. Gotham, the butler, met her at the door.

"Madam will be gone for the week end?" he asked.

"Including the week end," Mrs. Van Orton amended.

The town car was waiting at the curb. He helped her into it and stood waiting at the door while she settled back comfortably. She looked up questioningly.

"Will Madam leave any message?" Gorham asked.

"Oh," she sighed, "just say I've gone."

"For an indefinite stay, Madam?"

Languidly, Mrs. Van Orton motioned to the chauffeur. "No," she said. "Just say I've gone."

The purring motor drew away. Only Gorham's eyes moved as he watched it turn the corner. With a start he recovered himself and closed his mouth. "Well!" he said as he walked up the stairs. A greater degree of volubility had returned to him when he reported the incident to the cook.

JUST for the moment, Gilda Ransome's life had crystallized into one desperate wish: if she couldn't scratch her thigh, this instant, she would go stark, raving mad. A few hours earlier she had thought that if she didn't have breakfast life would be insupportable. Hunger was bad enough—but this itch!

"You may rest now," said Mr. Blake, the well-known designer of the fleshier covers of the naughtier magazines. He turned away and lit a cigarette. Gilda applied her nails to her skin as she went behind a screen and drew on a dressing-gown.

She began to think about her hunger again. She was not hungry because she was on a reducing diet—she needed neither reduction nor addition. Every artist for whom she had posed had agreed that her figure was "just the type"—presumably the type that sells magazines. And her face was certainly no less attractive than her figure—which is an emphatic statement.

She felt starved because influenza had kept her idle for three weeks and during that time her money had run out. She had never been one to save.

Later in the day she fainted while trying to hold a tiring pose. Mr. Blake was very much annoyed, and he determined that in the future he would use stronger, if less perfect, models.

IN THE West Indies there were many, many men who would have testified to the cleverness of Jeremiah Van Orton. As a lad of twenty he had come to Curaçao from Holland, and for forty-five years thereafter he had remained in the Indies. Then he had decided that he was too rich and too old to go on working. That was his first mistake. If he had kept his nose to the grindstone, he would not have come to New York. He would not have met Marion Martin, the actress. He would not have made a fool of himself.

Van Orton sat huddled in front of an open fire and thought the matter over. In this climactic hour he paused to review his life and works.

Vivid flashes of memory confused his efforts to keep his thoughts orderly. A tongue of flame licked around a log in the fireplace. A thread of scented smoke curled into the room. . . . A night in the Haitian jungle—when was it? Twenty—thirty years ago? A black wench was dying. "For no reason," the doctor said; "for superstition. Voodoo." . . . Marion Martin had been convincing. She had said that she was tired of young men—men whom she could not respect. She had said a man was not in his prime until sixty or seventy. Until then, he was callow, unproved, not worthy of admiration or love. He knew nothing of metropolitan people. He had been attracted to her and, presently, he had believed and loved her. . . . What was that about the natives destroying with such care every fingernail cutting, every hair? One had to be careful—voodoo was strong in the West Indies. . . . He had given Marion his honorable name

and a million dollars besides. Even if she hadn't pretended to love him, he might have done the same. She had given him the illusion of youth. He had thought of a future with her, for her. He might have lived for ever!

And now he was nothing but an old fool who was going to die. But so was she. Oh, yes, so was she!

The idea of following his wife to wherever she might come to rest and murdering her there never occurred to Jeremiah Van Orton. He was too tired and feeble for such a melodramatic rôle. One did not spend a lifetime in the Indies for nothing. He was clever; except for this little interlude of marriage, he had always been clever. He would find a way, a good way—a safe way for him, an unpleasant way for her.

Jeremiah Van Orton could always think better among his beautiful collection of paintings. He went to the drawing-room and drew up a chair before a Hobbema landscape. There he remained until he had planned all the details of his vengeance.

IN THE restaurant of the Hotel Lafayette, Michael Bonze sat across the table from his friend, Pierre Vanneau, and cursed the age in which they both were born.

"What does art mean in the Twentieth Century?" he asked rhetorically. "Nothing! People talk about the dynamic beauty of a new stream-lined toilet seat or the Empire State Building. Or take Surrealism: daubs—damn it!—daubs by clumsy, color-blind house-painters! Picasso eats while I starve! Cocteau is the white-haired boy while I worry myself bald! People don't want things to look like what they are—they want them to look like the sublimation of the mood of the essence of the psychological reaction to what they might be if they weren't what they are. Oh, I know it sounds like sour grapes, but I wouldn't mind if it weren't for the fact that I'm a painter with greater talent than any of them. If I were living in Henry the Eighth's time, people would now be collecting Bonzes instead of Holbeins. Damn the Twentieth Century!"

"Look," said Vanneau, "have you ever painted a beautiful young girl? You know—curves and flowing hair and so on?"

Bonze slapped his big hand down on the table top and the dishes jumped. "Are you trying to be insulting?" he bellowed. "Do you take me for Henry Clive?—or—or Zuloaga, maybe? No! No, I haven't painted any pretty valentines of beautiful young girls!"

Vanneau murmured into his coffee cup, "Rubens did. Tiepolo did. Titian did. . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" said Bonze. "You know what I meant. People won't take that sort of thing from a modern artist—it isn't art. Art is old, wrinkled-up men, or nauseous arrangements of dried fish and rotten apples, or anything sufficiently ugly and nasty."

"How do you know that is so?" Vanneau asked. "What modern artist has dared to paint a *pretty* picture? I don't know of anyone since Greuze, and his picture sold well enough."

"Well——" Bonze began doubtfully.

"And look," Vanneau continued, "in this jaded age, sex appeal is important. Important? It is everything!" He spread out his arms in an all-embracing gesture. "And what do you create for an avid public? A public that waters at the mouth at the very mention of nudism or Mae West? You give them old men and dried fish! Don't weep on *my* shoulder—you give me a pain!"

Bonze was still feeling a little sorry for himself. "I give Meyergold, the critic, a pain, too. Today, he came to the studio and said he didn't think I was ready, just yet, to have a show. He stayed about fifteen minutes. Damn him!"

ON THE morning following his wife's departure, Jeremiah Van Orton engaged the services of a Mr. Moses Winkler, a student of biology, who was promised double payment if he could manage to get through his work without asking questions. He was led into a lady's boudoir and told that he must go over the entire room with a microscope in order to collect every human remain, no matter how small or apparently unimportant.

Mr. Van Orton watched every move he made. Somehow, Moses did not like the eagerness with which the old man greeted each new find. It made him quite nervous.

When Moses finished his work he was able to deliver to his employer a surprizing number of small envelopes, on each of which he had written a description of the contents. One held grains of dust from a nail-file; another, an eyelash. On a brush in the bathroom he had found a few flakes of skin. A minute drop of blood had been discovered on a handkerchief in the laundry basket. . . . The list went on.

Moses was paid and dismissed. He was glad to go.

Van Orton added the envelopes to a collection he had made of all the photographs of his wife that she had left in the house. He looked long at the relics before locking them safely away.

"It is not a great deal," he muttered to himself, "but in Haiti I've known them to do it with less—much less."

WITHIN a month, old Mr. Van Orton had become the scandal of Sutton Place. Every day, from nine until six, a constant stream of handsome young women entered and left his house. Much to Gorham's bewilderment and disapproval, it had become his master's custom to sit in the drawing-room and interview the young ladies, one by one. Discreet inquiries elicited the fact that they were artists' models answering a newspaper advertisement.

"What," Gorham had asked the cook, "does the old reprobate want with a model? And if he wants a model, why is he so hard to satisfy? He must have seen two hundred of them already and he's not kept one over ten minutes."

It was the cook's considered opinion that Jeremiah Van Orton was an indecent, dirty old man who should be put away where he couldn't do any harm.

The procession of applicants ended when Gilda Ransome was ushered into the drawing-room. Gorham was called and told that no more models would be seen. He breathed a sigh of relief and stole a glance at the young lady who had been chosen from among so many. Gorham had a shock — for a second he had thought she was Mrs. Van Orton. It was a startling resemblance.

MICHAEL BONZE sat in his studio window and looked at the dreary square with bare trees and muddy streets. It was a picture of his mood. His money was running low and he was thinking that he ought to be putting in a stock of canned baked beans instead of buying a half-case of gin. There was nothing he wanted to paint. He hated painting and art patrons and critics.

A sedate foreign limousine came splashing along the street below and stopped at the door to his studio building.

The sight didn't make him any happier. "Art patron!" he said with a wealth of expression in his voice.

In a moment there was a knock on the door, and Michael opened it to admit Jeremiah Van Orton.

"You are Michael Bonze?" he asked.

Bonze admitted his identity, although, just then, he was not particularly proud of it. The caller presented his card with the question. "You have heard of me?"

"Yes," said Bonze; "I've heard you have quite a large collection of Flemish paintings. Will you take a chair?"

Van Orton launched into his business at once. "I have come to see you," he said, "because I want a special kind of painting which you do better than anyone I know."

"Thank you!" Michael murmured and crossed his fingers behind him.

"Not that I like the sort of painting you do," the old man continued, "on the contrary, I dislike it intensely. It is dull, spiritless—I might say, insipid."

"Oh, do say 'insipid'!" said Michael. "Also say 'profound' etc. at once!"

"Come, come," said Van Orton, calmly. "This is no time for compliments. I am not here to discuss art but to make you a proposition which you will find highly beneficial, financially."

Bonze had a sudden vision of rows of canned baked beans, and he held his tongue.

"For a particular reason, which is none of your affair, I wish you to paint a life-size nude of a model I have selected. The pose makes very little difference, but I suggest that you have her reclining on a chaise-longue. For background you may use drapery or anything you please—it is of no importance."

Bonze asked: "Would you mind telling me why I should have been chosen for this work?"

"Because your painting is so realistically accurate that not even a colored photograph can compare with it. I don't consider it art, but it will serve my purpose."

After all, a man had to have some pride. "I'm not interested," said Bonze.

No shade of disappointment crossed the old man's face. "No, no," he agreed, "of course not. But you would, perhaps, be interested in fifteen thousand dollars, a third payable now?"

Michael resisted an impulse to jump up and kiss the beneficent bald head. "Write the check and send me the model," he said. "I'll start today."

"Good!" said Van Orton. "But now I must lay down two important conditions. First, I will give you a number of photographs of a young woman who bears some resemblance to the model you will use. I want you to study the pictures very closely, because your painting must look more like them than like the model."

"But why," Michael protested, "why can't I simply paint a portrait of the subject of the photographs? It would be a lot more satisfactory and easier."

"If the job were as easy as that, I wouldn't be paying you fifteen thousand dollars." Van Orton reached in the pocket of his coat and withdrew ten or twelve little envelopes. "The second request that I must make is this," he continued. "Each of these packets contains a pinch of powder. They are plainly marked, 'hair, nails, skin, lips,' and so on. Now, when you mix your paints for these various details, you must add these powders as indicated. You are a man of honor?"

"Certainly!" said the very mystified painter.

"You will give me your word that this will be done according to my instructions?"

Michael nodded.

"Very well. Here is my check for five thousand dollars. Hurry your work as much as you can with safety and let me know the instant it is done." Van Orton went to the door. "I brought the model with me in the car. I will send her up with the photographs. Good day!"

Bonze collapsed into a chair as the door closed.

SPRING has come to Venice and the Piazza San Marco has a freshly washed and burnished look. Mrs. Van Orton sits at Florian's on the edge of the square, sipping a Pernod. She feels that God's in His Heaven and Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries.

Mrs. Van Orton has a figure that looks well in anything, but its effectiveness increases in inverse ratio with the amount of clothing she wears; hence, to some extent, Venice and the Lido. When she walks along the beach, this summer, the women will turn away and the men will turn toward her. The women will say, "Who is that doll-faced American in the daring bathing-costume?" The men are discreet on the Lido—they will say nothing. But they will look.

AND spring has come to Washington Square. The old trees are beginning to think about their Easter clothing. Probably they will decide that the well-dressed tree will wear a very light and delicate chartreuse. Feathers, too, may be worn.

Michael Bonze looked up from his painting. "Darling," he said, "you're the best work I've ever done. And you're just about finished."

"Thank goodness!" said Gilda Ransome. "May I move, now?"

"Go ahead," he said. "Get up and we'll make some coffee."

He put down his palette and brushes and helped her into her kimono, kissing, as he did so, the back of her neck.

"I wonder," he said, "if I could have done such a good portrait if I hadn't fallen in love with you. I owe a lot to old Van Orton. If it hadn't been for him—and for Pierre Vanneau——"

"Why Pierre Vanneau?" she asked.

Michael smiled in memory of his annoyance. "It was he who first suggested that I paint beautiful women. I was furious."

"So shall I be," said Gilda, "if you dare to paint any woman but me."

"Never fear!" he laughed. "There will be no one but you. I'll paint you as everything from Medusa to the Virgin Mary."

"I *might* make a Medusa," said Gilda.

Later in the day, the picture was finished to the immense satisfaction of both artist and model.

The next morning Michael arose before Gilda was awake. He wanted to look at the portrait in the cold light of dawn. Without, he told himself, undue self-praise, he found it good—very good. Maybe it wasn't modern, maybe the style wasn't original, perhaps it wasn't spontaneous. But the draftsmanship, the color, the texture, the composition—that was all perfect. No one could deny it. It would take no violent stretch of the imagination to conceive the beautiful creature rising from her couch and stepping lightly down from the canvas to the floor.

Bonze thought it wasn't fair that this, his best work, was destined to be hung in a dark, lonely house, among a lot of gloomy Flemish paintings, for the exclusive pleasure of a solitary old Dutchman. After all, Art was for the masses. If Meyergold could see this, he'd sing a different tune. If it weren't for the money, he'd never let Van Orton have the picture

—the insulting old idiot! He wouldn't appreciate it, anyway. It wouldn't have made any difference to him if the picture had been good or bad. All he wanted was a likeness.

On the heels of this reflection, Bonze realized in a flash of inspiration how he could keep his picture. He would make a copy and give *that* to Van Orton. Naturally, it wouldn't be so good as the original, but what of that? He hadn't promised to deliver a masterpiece. Of course, there was the matter of those little packets of powder—he'd used it all in the original—but—well, it was silly, anyway.

He woke Gilda with a shout and told her his plan. "I'll have the thing finished by the end of the week. Then I'll get my check and we'll go right down to the City Hall and be married."

Gilda looked at the clock on the bed table. "Is this a nice hour to propose to a girl?" she groaned and pulled the covers over her head.

Whistling loudly and cheerfully, Michael started to work.

JEREMIAH VAN ORTON crouched before the likeness of his wife lying nude upon a chaise-longue. He had never seen her so. She had always kept him at arm's length. But now she was near—near enough to touch with the finger tips, or a long pin, or a keen-edged knife.

Though never for a moment did he take his mad gaze from the portrait, he did not neglect the task at which he worked. Methodically, he sharpened on a whetstone a number of efficient-looking probes and knives. The scrape of the steel and his panting breath were the only sounds in the darkened room. Incessantly, he moistened his opened lips with his tongue. His heart pounded in his ears.

Jeremiah knew that the excitement of the execution was killing him, that he must hurry. He got to his feet and addressed the painting in a high, cracked voice.

"Marion," he said, "I hold your life in this image by virtue of your skin and blood. Do you understand? This is you!"

He tried the point of a blue steel probe against his thumb. His voice rose to a shriek.

"You are going to die, Marion, my love, wherever you are!"

His bloodshot eyes fixed themselves in a hypnotic stare as he approached the portrait. Great veins throbbed in his shriveled neck and temples.

"EXCELLENT!" said Mr. Meyergold. "Really excellent! I must say, my dear Bonze, you surprize me!"

He looked around with an expression frequently worn by owners of dogs that are able to sit up or shake hands. He assumed an air of patronizing pride. He reasoned that he had played an important part in the development of this young artist by his stern and uncompromising rejection, until now, of everything he had done. He turned again to the picture and nodded. Bonze was a good dog and it was no more than fair to throw him a bone—he had earned it. "Excellent!" he repeated. "What do you call it?"

"I call it," said Michael, racking his brain for a likely name, "I call it 'Naked Lady'."

Mr. Meyergold glanced up sharply. "Naked Lady." He rolled it around on his tongue. "Good! Oh, very good! A fine distinction. This is no ordinary nude; no allegorical Grecian goddess to whom a yard of drapery more or less makes no difference." He thought that an awfully good line for a review and decided to make a note of it the instant

he left. He laughed in appreciation of his wit. "Oh, no, this young lady is shy and embarrassed without her clothing." He went on enlarging the idea in the hope that he would hit upon another useful line. "Here you've caught a lady in a most undignified situation. I get the impression that your 'Naked Lady' is very much annoyed with us for looking at her."

IN HER cabin on the beach, Marion Van Orton was changing from her bathing-suit to an elaborate pair of pajamas. Suddenly she had a distinct impression that she was being observed. She jerked a bath-towel up to her chest and swung around. Apparently there was nothing to account for her fear. But she *knew* that someone was minutely examining her. Hurriedly, she pulled on her pajamas and ran from the cabin, fully expecting to surprize some rude man in the act of staring through a chink in the wall. There was no one near.

In spite of the heat of the day, she went back into the cabin and wrapped a heavy cloak tightly about her. Still the miserable feeling persisted.

"My goodness!" she said to herself, "I feel positively naked!"

A MONTH later, Marion Van Orton had cause to remember that day on the Lido. She was sitting in the Excelsior Bar, reading a *New York Times,* two weeks old. She had really been looking through it to see if there were any more news of the death of her husband. For a few days the papers had been full of "Millionaire Husband of Actress Found Dead." When she had first heard of it she had wondered which of the paintings it was that had been found slashed to rags and tatters, and she wondered what had happened before his heart failed that had made him want to ruin one of the pictures of which he had always been so proud.

There was nothing more in the *Times.* The story had been squeezed dry and dropped in favor of an expedition to the South Pole. Finishing a rather dull announcement of the forthcoming exhibit of paintings by an artist who had just married his model, Marion turned to her handsome companion.

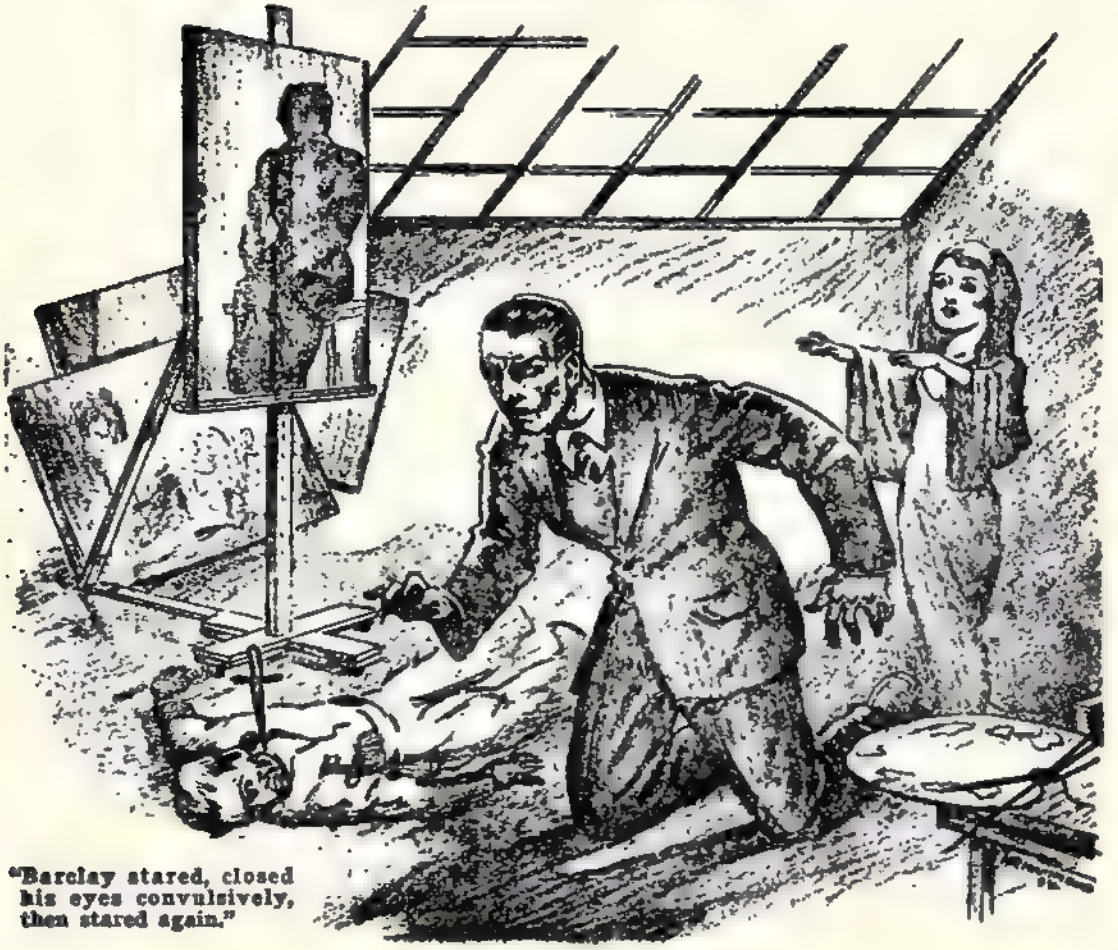
"Some people insist," she said, "that more important things happen in New York than here, or anywhere else. But look at this paper; there isn't an interesting or important thing in it. It's all too, too boring for words."

And then, quite suddenly, that awful nightmarish feeling returned to her. She was entirely naked and people were looking at her, criticizing her, appraising her. As she crossed her arms at her throat, here eyes darted about the room, searching for the guilty Peeping Tom. She could detect no one, but she knew, she *knew* that to someone her clothing was perfectly transparent.

Without excusing herself to her startled friend, Mrs. Van Orton jumped up and rushed to her room in the hotel. She locked and bolted the door. The sensation was growing stronger every moment. She pulled down the shades and turned off the light. But it was no better. She ran into the clothes closet and shut the door. Even there, there was no escape from the certain knowledge that she was bare and defenseless before a crowd. She drew the hanging dresses tightly around her and shrank into a corner of the closet. She felt she was going mad.

The Sinister Painting

By GREYE LA SPINA



"Barclay stared, closed his eyes convulsively, then stared again."

An eery story of a fiendish murder and a midget psychic investigator—by the author of "Invaders From the Dark" and "The Devil's Pool"

THE taxi drove off, leaving Funk on the Hoddeston lawn, surrounded by valises. Funk was thinking it more than merely odd that Barclay, for whose coaching he had come prepared to spend a month, had not met him as planned. He tried the screen door; it was hooked inside.

"Hello, in there!" he hailed hopefully.

There was no response. The Hoddeston farm lay drenched in a torpid lethargy for which it was obvious more than the July heat must be responsible. Within the house, no one stirred. On the surrounding fields, no one was abroad. Even the usual sounds of the farm animals were hushed.

Funk was unpleasantly affected. Surely the entire household had not gone to meet his train and somehow missed it.

He carried his traps to the stoop, crossed the yard to the barnyard, and halloed again. He knew of old where Barclay's studio was, so he set off down the path toward the grateful shade of the woods.

The gray stone walls of the old building soon glinted through the tree trunks and heavy foliage. A strong conviction possessed Funk that Barclay was not within. In fact, he found the studio door padlocked. He noted that the west window was rudely boarded up. He walked around the studio to the north.

Here the trees had been cut down, and the studio wall was entirely of glass. He peered in with deepening curiosity, but apart from the usual litter of easels, painting paraphernalia and accessories, canvases in serried rows against the walls, his attention was almost immediately drawn to a painting propped against the south wall where the full light from the opposite windows poured in revealingly.

"Rum go!" Funk muttered, puzzled. "That never is Barclay's work. And he would never have let a student perpetrate such a monstrosity of line and crude color."

He pressed his face to the glass, cupping it against the outside light.

"That old man," Funk said aloud, amazed, "may be crudely done, but he's also absolutely horrible. His hands—ugh, they're dead hands. Bloodless—waxen—aaarrrgh! Something about the way he's sitting there—drooping as if he hadn't the strength of himself to sit erect, and was being held by something—something without, that you can't see. . . . I don't like the thing. It's ugly. There's —something wrong with it."

He said this last with conviction, and as he exclaimed became aware of another gaze fixed upon himself. He snapped upright and wheeled quickly. Waiting patiently for him to finish his examination of the studio's interior stood a man in patched, stained blue overalls.

"Well?" snapped Funk sharply, a bit taken aback.

"Mr. Barclay's at the house, sor. You're Mr. Funk? I'm Mulcahy, Hoddeston's hired man."

Funk nodded. "All right. I'm coming. How did Mr. Barclay come to miss my train?"

"We was all down to the police station, sor." Mulcahy fell in behind him.

"Police station?" echoed Funk. "What's been going on here?"

"I found Mr. Oakey dead in the studio this mornin', sor."

"What!" Funk whirled and confronted the Irishman.

"There's somethin' wrong in there, sor. I saw blood on the ould divil's beard." The man's voice quavered.

"Snap out of it, Mulcahy. Are you referring to that—picture?"

"I am that, sor."

"Blood on the old man's beard? Ridiculous! I saw none."

Mulcahy insisted stubbornly: "Blood it was, sor. An' the poor young man's was all drained out av him, sor."

Funk stiffened to deep attention. "Ha! This sounds intriguing. Blood on the old man's beard?"

"An' drippin' from his dead fingers, sor. An' not wan dhrop left in the corpse, sor. Blood—all over the dommed ould divil's whiskers, an' his dead fingers, sor. Mary Mother!" Mulcahy crossed himself with pious haste.

"Who did that painting?" Funk demanded, turning again toward the house.

"A mon be the name av Silva, sor. He's afther bein' a cabinet-maker, but he got to thinkin' he cud paint, so he made that beauty back there, divil fly away wid him!"

"He sure can paint!" muttered Funk cryptically.

"He's mixin' somethin' wid his paint that only divils from the Pit can give him," the Irishman declared darkly. He hesitated, then rushed on: "Sor, the night before the poor lad was murthered, there was a fine canvas of Mr. Barclay's cut into ribbons, and Mr. Oakey's prize picture the same. What might that mean, along with the poor lad's bein' killed the next night? An' Silva only gettin' honorable mention last week, where he was lookin' for first prize?"

"Looks as if Silva had a motive," declared Funk as they walked into the barnyard.

LIFE was stirring normally about the farm now, as if a ban of enchanted silence had been lifted. Funk could see Barclay's bulky body leaning over the valises on the front stoop. He hailed his friend, then asked Mulcahy hastily: "What do the police say?"

"Anny of us might have done it, sor, but the studio was locked from the inside. An' there's no motive. An' they can't figure where the poor lad's blood wint, sor." Back of the simple words pushed a dark significance of terrible things.

"Looks as if there were more here than appears on the surface."

"Right you are, sor. From now on, Tom Mulcahy wears a blessed medal next his hide, day an' night."

Funk met Barclay's welcoming hand with a heartening grip.

"Sorry to have missed you, Funk, but this ghastly tragedy has dislocated all plans. I—I was fond of the boy," groaned Barclay, his face working. "He had a gift, had Harry. I—I was looking forward to what he would do with color in the not far future. And now——" his voice broke.

"Where's my room, Barclay?" Funk gathered up his bags and followed the other painter up the front stairs.

Both men lighted cigarettes in silence. Barclay stared abstractedly from the window, while Funk unpacked rapidly, puffing clouds of smoke about himself as he tossed shirts, underwear, ties, into the open bureau drawers.

"I want to know how Silva's painting got into your studio," he said at last, with an air of relief as he finished his work.

"So you are taking that attitude?" Barclay asked, his eyes heavy.

Funk did not attempt to evade the implied issue. "Anybody but a crass, materialistic jackass would," he responded quietly.

"I didn't know you went in for that sort of thing. I've no time for anything but painting. Just making a living takes most of my time these days, Funk."

The younger man's eyes snapped. "A very little suffices for me. I'm too fascinated with studying the truths underlying the illusions of material existence. Not that I've gotten very far, but what I know, I *know*."

"Then perhaps you can say what's unnatural about poor Harry's death? I know there's—something wrong about it."

"Something wrong!" echoed the younger man thoughtfully. "Yes, there's something wrong—and uncanny—about this lad's death. As to its being unnatural, there are many strange and little-known laws operating along lines so new to us——" He broke off there, his expression clearing as if an illuminating idea had suddenly clarified the situation for him. "I believe the poor chap's death is due to an extremely interesting example of the transference of an evil will-to-power."

Barclay wheeled from the window, say-

ing abruptly: "I didn't tell the police what I felt lay behind this tragedy. I have no hankering to live in an insane asylum. Now I have a faint hope that *you* may be able to appreciate the strangeness of my experience. Listen!

"Manuel Silva settled here a few years ago and has been doing well as a cabinetmaker. Recently he learned that I got from three hundred dollars up, for a canvas. He thought this an easy way to get rich, but I refused to teach him. You know, I never take any but advanced students of decided promise. My refusal roused Silva's furious resentment.

"I have instituted an annual art exhibit in town. Silva entered three canvases, to force my hand. They were rather terrible. One was a blacksmith, dark, sullen, sinister; he was hammering viciously at what appeared to be a battered crucifix. Another was a farmer slaughtering a wretched hog that somehow looked like a naked man; the butcher's face wore a too realistic grin of sadistic enjoyment as he wielded his bloody knife. The third — the third was the painting you've just seen in my studio.

"Harry's entry took first prize; this was inevitable. I felt inclined to encourage a couple of young local artists, so gave them honorable mention. Not to slight Silva's pride, I included him.

"The night before the canvases were removed, Harry and I were in the gallery, and he pointed out that someone had deliberately cut the honorable mention ribbon on Silva's canvas so that it hung in dangling strips. Odd, that, eh?"

"You're opening vistas," replied Funk, lighting another cigarette from the one he had been smoking. "You are absorbingly interesting."

"I criticized Silva's painting, observing that Harry was right when he said it gave him the jitters, but that in just that degree it possessed a touch of wild genius. Harry pronounced it ghastly, to paint a hunched-up old man as dead as a doornail, his hands frightful, decomposing — yet sitting up there — ugh! Silva's colors were crude, his drawing distorted —just how, it would be difficult to say, but—wrong, you understand—wrong.

"I said I dared not encourage Silva because of a very strange quality in his work—that something wrong. And then we both nearly jumped out of our skins, for in the dusk behind us someone broke into an ugly chuckle, and we turned to see a dark figure slouching out. It was Silva, and I realized that he'd heard me pronounce him an evil genius. Harry made light of my compunctions, but I was disturbed.

"We confronted the old man in the painting once more. As twilight gained the room, a murky dusk seemed creeping into the very canvas. Its shadows deepened. The old man merged into his dark background; all but his pallid face, his grayish beard, the waxen fingers dropping over his angular knees. It *was* wrong. Entirely wrong. And then all at once Harry twitched my sleeve, and exclaimed, 'Let's get out of here!' and we turned and plunged into the street, stricken by some subtle panic so obsessing that it was not until we were back at the Hoddeston farm that we realized how foolish and unreasonable had been our flight."

FUNK lighted another cigarette.

"We went sketching next day," Barclay went on, "and Hoddeston brought our canvases back to the studio. That night he told me that Silva had sent me one of his for a gift; so Harry and I went down to see which one. We lighted candles, and really, we got a nasty shock. The flickering, inadequate candle-light made that old man appear more than ever

an entity with a horrid existence independent of his painted presentment. Harry said, 'My God!' in a kind of comic dismay.

"I knew instinctively that Silva was up to no good; he bore me malice. His very gift seemed to convey dire menace. In the pale candle-light the old man's beard appeared to rustle stiffly as if his lips were parting under its bushy shelter. Of course, I could not *see* anything, but I *felt* that I was seeing a pale dead tongue flick moisture over dry dead lips. Ugh!"

"That must have been an odd sensation," cogitated Funk aloud, as he expelled a thick cloud of smoke. "You make it very clear."

"Yes? Well, there's more of it, Funk. Oakey and I went over our canvases to check on their return and good condition. We were satisfied. Just remember this point, will you? We padlocked the studio door and went off to bed. When we went in next morning, the padlock was undisturbed, and all the windows locked on the inside.

"But one of my best canvases had been slit into ribbons. And Harry's, which had taken first prize, was completely demolished, even the frame. That last act of vandalism made me feel bad. I'd been sure the boy could cash in on his work, and he needed the money. He took it like a Spartan, but he told me he was going to sleep in the studio that night, for he felt sure that Silva had done the damage.

"I agreed, although I couldn't figure out how Silva could have gotten inside. So last night I left the boy there. He said he was going to hang something over the old man's gosh-awful face. I offered to stay with him, but he wouldn't have it. This morning——" Barclay broke down, turning back to the window with a suspicious gulp.

"Mulcahy told me," Funk hastened to say, lighting another cigarette.

"It was ghastly, Funk. Mulcahy was howling 'Blood!' at every jump he took. Blood, he yelled, on the old man's beard!"

"H'm. How about the coroner?"

"Harry'd been dead for hours. Finger marks on his throat. Every drop of blood drained from his body," Barclay said with slow emphasis. "Mulcahy had seen him through the north windows. I had to break the west window to get in. The coroner said at first that he'd had a fit but finally decided he'd been killed by a person unknown."

"About the blood?" queried Funk.

"Mulcahy was right about it. Funk—I saw it, too."

"It's not there now," Funk declared.

Barclay nodded. "That's another strange thing. When I rushed over, I found poor Harry sprawling on the floor, his body all twisted in a grotesque, gruesome position. And so terribly white! As I threw myself on the floor beside him, something struck upon my inner ear. It was a sound. But *such* a sound! Even as I heard it, I knew I was hearing what could not be apprehended physically.

"I sprang to my feet and confronted Silva's hideous canvas. God, it was horrible!" He shuddered at the bare recollection. "The painted old man sat there motionless, but it was a sinister restraint, Funk. I stared, stricken by a horror that affected me with nausea, for I saw then that someone had smeared that ancient's deathly pallor with crimson that crawled down the painted gray beard. The dead hands that hung over the angular knees were dripping, every pallid finger-tip, with blood. *Blood,* Funk!"

"How do you know it was blood?" Funk demanded sharply.

"I—I touched it," whispered the old man, distastefully.

"And then?" Funk prompted, not ungently.

"A ghastly thing came to pass. I did not see it. I felt, rather than saw. I became aware with that inner sense of the movement of one of the old man's painted arms. It lifted with the jerking unevenness of an automaton, and passed across the stained gray beard. I say, it moved. I felt it move, yet at the same time I was aware that it was only painted, hence incapable of movement. It was a Something Else behind it that actually moved.

"I find it almost impossible to clarify my intuitions," Barclay deprecated despairingly, "other than to say that while the painted figure did not stir, I was yet inwardly aware that it lifted one arm and wiped away the crimson from its beard. Then it reached out on either side, to drag off that horrible drip from its waxen finger-tips against the painted grass that reddened under them.

"God! It was the more horrible because, although the figure did not show movement to my straining eyes, yet I saw the crimson life-blood of poor Harry disappearing from the canvas as those movements which I felt, rather than saw, took place. Of course this explanation is inadequate," he finished.

FUNK pushed the consumed tip of his cigarette to the fresh one he was holding between his thin lips. A cloud of blue smoke enveloped him, out of which his voice pronounced decidedly: "Not inadequate, my dear fellow. On the contrary, it is very enlightening; so clear that I believe we may yet punish the murderer of that poor lad."

Barclay's dreamy eyes burned with sudden fire. "I'd give a year of my life to accomplish that," he exclaimed fiercely.

"I hardly think so much will be required, but you may have to sacrifice one or two of your canvases. We'd better get the rest of Oakey's work over here. And Silva must learn that you are taking steps to protect Harry's work and your own. He must be informed that tomorrow night you yourself will sleep in the studio. That will bring him," Funk predicted darkly.

"You agree that it's Silva!" cried Barclay in relief.

"I've no doubt of it. But not *in propria persona.* He's projecting his astral body through that hideous old man, and he's already made a grave error."

"What do you mean?"

"He's permitted himself to savor human blood. Hence, he can not be permitted to — continue. He's dangerous, now. He will be yet more so, unless checked. I propose to do this in the only permanent way possible."

"We have no proof of his presence in the studio, Funk. Who would believe the intangible evidence of my experience?"

"No one, ordinarily," Funk agreed, adding quickly, "but *I* believe. And there is another person who will not only believe, but will furnish me with the means of putting a stop to Silva's murderous proclivities, without disturbing the authorities unduly," he finished dryly.

"Wouldn't it be wise to return that picture to Silva? Or cut it to bits and burn it?" suggested Barclay uneasily.

"Later," said Funk, queerly. "You see, Silva has somehow learned how to transfer his will-for-evil to that creature of his own making. It is through that same creation that we must reach him and stop his criminal career before it is too late."

Barclay sighed. "You speak as if you knew what you were talking about, Funk. I can't just understand you, but I feel

that you are somehow right. What do you wish done?"

"Get Mulcahy — or Hoddeston — to clear out all Oakey's canvases. Leave only a couple of your own that you don't particularly care about, so as not to stir Silva's suspicions overly. He'll imagine you're exhibiting. Then have Hoddeston step in and tell Silva what happened to the canvases in the studio, and ask him to have his moved out of harm's way. That will appear a kindly impulse on your part, and he will reply that he'll send for his canvas in a couple of days. He'll figure on polishing you off by then," finished Funk callously.

"Agreeable thought, that," sighed the older painter.

"Now, you're going to lend me your roadster. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Be sure Silva is given to understand that tomorrow night you'll be sleeping in the studio. Under no circumstances, however, venture in there tonight," Funk warned gravely. "Tonight Silva, or whatever wakens in the studio under the stimulus of his evil purpose, may have free play. But tomorrow night—ah, tomorrow night *I* shall be there, not you."

"I won't permit your getting into a nasty situation, Funk. This isn't your affair, after all. Harry was my protegé. It's up to me."

"Are you prepared to give effective battle to a painted demon, Barclay?" Funk's laugh was incredulous. "Can you, through that painted thing, silence for ever the intangible, distant malefactor?"

"You can do such things?" said Barclay's hushed murmur.

"I shall know how to, before I return tomorrow afternoon."

"But how?"

"I'm going to someone who knows. I shall demand the secret. She will yield it, I am certain. I'm going to see Gwen Carradorne."

"Where have I heard that name?" puzzled Barclay.

"Possibly in connection with her published brochures. Her *Reality of the Abstract* is fairly well known; it's discussed everywhere."

"Quite likely," sighed Barclay. "I seem to remember it vaguely."

"Now," pursued Funk briskly, "how about your car?"

IT WAS dusk when Funk returned on the following day. The seriousness and abstraction that wove a cloak about him struck Barclay's curious inquiries into silence. A certain high air about the younger artist forbade imperiously any break upon that lofty mood. Funk's first query was, Had Silva been duly informed of the occupation of the studio that night?

"He knows. He told Hoddeston that he would call for his unappreciated masterpiece in a couple of days." The words were significantly emphasized.

"I rather fancied he'd say that. He knows you'll be there tonight?"

"Hoddeston told him, if there were any further trouble, I'd sleep there from tonight on, to protect his painting."

"Excellent!" Funk rubbed his hands together and blew a cloud of thick smoke from the cigarette in one corner of his mouth. "And was there any?"

"Yes. Last night the two canvases I'd left were demolished."

"Good! He'll be expecting you to sleep there tonight. Let's have supper. Then I'll run into town and fetch Miss Carradorne. She insists upon coming out; the time was too brief to prepare me to handle the situation single-handed."

"That's extraordinarily kind of her, Funk. But if she is to be at the studio tonight, why not I?" Barclay insisted.

"She would have handled it alone, only that she——" Funk broke off suddenly, looking apologetic. "Sorry I can't be more explicit, but she bans discussion of herself unless she decides to come out into the open, which she rarely does. She's—well, wait until you meet her, if she permits it," Funk broke off, in a kind of embarrassment. "You'll understand then. But believe me, she is worthy the highest respect and admiration a human being could expect."

FUNK did not have to drive to town. Between dusk and dark a shining dark blue car with a special delivery body slipped into the driveway. From the limousine-like front two uniformed men alighted and walked to the rear of the car. There were wide doors there, which they proceeded to open. They withdrew, with the utmost care, a strange anachronism; a blue-and-black-and-gold decorated sedan chair, small and delicate. They placed themselves between the shafts and started toward the farmhouse.

Funk exclaimed, and sprang down the steps to meet that odd equippage. He bent over what was obviously an extended hand, white in the dusk. Barclay, staring, saw the young artist touch his lips to those extended fingers. A child's high, shrilly sweet voice gave an order, and the chair-bearers carried the sedan chair toward the barnyard. Funk followed, calling back as he went.

"See you tomorrow morning, Barclay." With that, he disappeared after the chair into the soft darkness beyond the barnyard.

Barclay felt that he could not sleep. He was intensely irritated that Gwen Carradorne should have sent a child to take her place in what he felt must be a post of danger. He went down to the shining automobile and walked around it with curiosity. The rear doors had been closed, and nothing marked it as out of the ordinary save, perhaps, the expensive type of shock-absorbers for a delivery body; and of course, what looked very like a periscope set in the top, as much out of place as was a modern child in a sedan chair.

He sat at his window, fell asleep there in his chair, and did not waken until Mrs. Hoddeston tapped at his door, calling that Mr. Funk and the little girl had returned. She volunteered that the little girl was a perfect little French doll.

Barclay took the stairs three at a stride. In the hall Funk sat on a hassock which brought his face slightly below the level of the small oval countenance of the child, who sat sedately on the hall chair.

Barclay noted with an artist's appreciation the bloom on her dazzling cheeks; the straight nose; the richly scarlet mobile lips. He approved the curling black lashes, finely penciled arching eyebrows, sleek black bobbed hair. Her creamy silk dress, rather longer than worn by most children of her age (apparently about six), was smocked in a knowing fashion with bright colors. Her feet were inappropriately encased in high-heeled French slippers.

All this the artist in Barclay captured at a glance, just as he took in the beauty of the slender, tiny hands, of the taper fingers, and the eloquence of every gesture. A strange, an unusual child, this. His leaping footsteps brought upon him a lifting of fringed eyelids, and what he felt shrinkingly was a glance of indifference. He stopped short at the foot of the staircase, abashed at this disdainful glance.

He knew all at once why this child's frock was longer than customary; why her tiny feet wore adult-styled foot-gear; why sophistication animated those taper

fingers. The cobalt blue eyes that regarded him from the child's elfin face were the eyes of a grown woman. They were the informed eyes of one who has passed through the fires of varied experiences; the eyes of one who has gazed unafraid upon unveiled mysteries. The child was *not* a child, but was an exquisite midget, a creature set apart from the entire world by her miniature proportions.

Funk sprang up, caught the other man's hand and drew him down to the hassock, himself sinking upon the floor so that both men's faces were below the level of the midget's.

"Barclay," Funk said, in a tone of repressed excitement, "Miss Carradorne permits me to present you."

"Honored, Miss Carradorne," mumbled Barclay, still confused under the keen gaze of those faintly derisive blue eyes. He understood it, after a minute; she was touched with amusement at his discomfiture.

An elfish smile twitched at one corner of her scarlet lips, and she actually turned away those too-shrewd eyes as if to spare Barclay's feelings, a kindly gesture which did not serve to tranquillize him, for there was just a touch of condescension in her half-smile.

"Mr. Funk has been showing me these canvases from your studio," she said, slowly, in a shrilly sweet voice. "I would very much like that snow scene; it is charming. If you will tell me the price——?"

Barclay's embarrassment vanished. Here he could be sure of himself.

"I would feel honored if you would accept it as a proof of my gratitude for your having come here," he began, but his eyes questioned Funk.

"You are anxious to learn the outcome of last night's plans?" said Miss Carradorne's high voice lightly.

Suspended in the bosom of her frock by a slender platinum chain was a platinum whistle which she put to her lips and sounded. At once the bearers of the sedan chair came up the steps and into the hall, holding the chair close to their mistress. Like some bright bird, so airy and graceful was her lithe movement, she seemed to fly from her chair into the sedan's shelter. She waved one tiny hand. The bearers took their light burden outside, slid it into place in the rear of the waiting automobile. They mounted into the front, and the car slipped noiselessly away down the road, bespeaking the many-cylindered motor by its very silence and power.

BARCLAY stared after it, amazed. "So that strange little thing is your wonderful Gwen Carradorne? Why didn't you warn me?"

Funk lighted a cigarette hastily and began surrounding himself with smoke. "Why didn't I? Because she won't be talked about. She's proud and sensitive. She considers her miniature body the ultimate of human perfection, and won't permit its comparison with what she considers our gross bodies. And she's abnormally proud of her brain. She has reason to be. I think it is the most highly developed I have ever known. As an occultist—she's the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter——"

Funk broke off bruskly. "You are anxious to know about last night? She has forbidden me to divulge details, but I may tell you briefly that Silva will never again repeat his evil act."

"He was there, then, last night?" gasped Barclay incredulously.

"Not *in propria persona,* but his familiar was already locked in with us, when I bolted the door behind Gwen and myself."

"What do you mean?"

Funk sighed resignedly. "Let's go down to the studio. It's easier to understand, when you've seen things with your own eyes."

The telephone rang. Mrs. Hoddeston ran out of the kitchen and answered it. An expression of horror settled on her placid face.

"Manuel Silva's been found dead, with a knife-wound in his throat," she called, and gave closer attention to the telephone.

Funk beckoned Barclay silently, and the two hurried across the barnyard and into the woods. With the key Barclay had loaned him, Funk unlocked the padlock. He pushed the studio door open. Words seemed superfluous.

Spread on the floor lay a painted canvas figure, pinned down by a knife through its throat. The edges of the canvas were sharply defined as if just cut out of the painting leaning against the south wall with a neatly trimmed vacancy in its center.

Barclay stared, closed his eyes convulsively, then stared again.

"I couldn't have done it alone," Funk kept repeating in a kind of feverish excitement. "*She* furnished the *power*. She'd have done it herself, but she's too —I mean," he corrected himself hastily, "*he* was too tall."

Barclay stared, motionless. He was absorbing the details of a bizarre thing which confirmed him in his hasty resolution to burn Silva's painting without delay.

The empty space in the painting distinctly outlined a drooping, seated figure. The painted canvas shape lying on the floor, pinned down by the knife through its pallid painted throat, could have filled that vacancy twice over.

It was a full length, standing figure. . . .

The Return

By JULIA BOYNTON GREEN

"Look, dearest, this shall be my flower!" she said,
"This starry jasmine." And she thrust a spray
For me to smell. "Remember!" Ah, today
I see her buoyant loveliness—her red
Sweet lips. In one brief twelvemonth she was dead.
Last night wind wailed. December's first snow lay
Upon the ground. Too unresigned to pray,
Too torn with racking grief to sleep, I fed
My misery on remembrance. "Love," I cried,
"Come back to me—come back! No heaven, no tomb
Can keep you from me. Come—my own, my own!"
And as I ceased the gloom was glorified—
I was aware that I was not alone—
A sudden scent of jasmine filled the room.

"There was a violent explosion of radiant energy that shocked him into temporary blindness."

Vine Terror

By HOWARD WANDREI

An unusual weird-scientific tale, about vegetable vampires that lusted for animal and human food

ROMAN SHOLLA stood perfectly still on his front sidewalk, bewildered. He blinked a few times, and opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. Then he thrust his still unlighted pipe into his pocket and ran.

There was reason enough for his fright. Sholla, proprietor of South's Cut-Rate Supplies, lived on the outskirts of the community below the hill on which stood the glass, stone, and metal faced South Experimental Laboratories.

It was about twenty minutes past seven when Sholla issued from his front door, in his hand a pipe, which he loaded methodically with a poking forefinger. He proceeded down his front walk, at

which point he produced a match from his side pocket and struck it on the mail-box nailed to the oak tree. But the tree wasn't there. It had moved, moved out of reach. The earth was shouldered aside. At the base of the huge, broken-barked bole was what seemed to be a wake of turf.

"Fo' fo'teen years," he explained excitedly to Eric Shane, who lived across the street, "I strike m' match on the tree. You see me do it. What is happen?" He looked around belligerently at the little group that had collected, and which had drifted back to the scene of the novelty.

"*I* tell you what. I come down the walk and put out my hand to the post-box to strike the match. Every morning just the same. Eric will tell you so. But now I can't reach it," he said, his voice trembling. "Look for yourself. The tree has move' away from the sidewalk!" He pointed passionately at the base of the tree with his unlighted pipe. Before it, between the little huddle of men and the tree, was a plowed furrow, like a short, fresh grave.

Wiry, dark little Fred Yanotsky, who had once inspected ore at the Ashton mills, was looking up at the laboratories on the hill above Sholla's house.

"You vill find vhy up d'ere, I t'ink," he said malignantly. "No good come of machines. I know. I work wit' machines for ten, twelve year. Many funny t'ings happen. Funny t'ings." His voice trailed off ominously.

"Ah!" exclaimed Sholla contemptuously. "You talk like crazy. Because you catch yourself in the wheels one time, whose fault was it? You want to hang the big stamp, maybe, or the digger? P'r'aps you like to burn those generator' up there, like witches in the old country?"

"I do' know," said Yanotsky slowly, shaking his head. "I see some awful funny t'ings." He looked up balefully at the power plant, and fingered the mutilations of the arm that had been caught in the mill machinery many years ago.

"Ay," spoke up an old bearded fellow, Papa Freng. "What has happened to the game? Tell me, Roman Sholla."

"The game?" said Sholla. "How do you mean?"

"The game, the small game. What has happened to all the rabbits? Where are the squirrels that used to come to my window for nuts, all summer and all winter? I tell you, there has been no small game seen here these three months, nor the small green snakes, even. Roman Sholla, what of the birds?"

"Birds? What are you talking about, papa? Up there is a bird, now." He pointed off at a slow-winged turkey buzzard of remarkable size, a really gigantic specimen, that was pursuing a low, undulating flight toward the wood that surrounded the hill and the laboratories. The five men at the oak tree turned and eyed the bird warily as though they were watching Judgment approach. The buzzard passed nearly overhead, somewhat to the right of Sholla's house, and side-winged into a wide spiral as it prepared to alight in the trees half-way between the house and the laboratories on the hill. Its trailing legs dropped a trifle, the wings spread umbrella-wise, and momentarily it disappeared from view among the foliage. Sholla turned to Papa Freng triumphantly, saying,

"Well, papa, there was one—or didn't I see it?"

"Look!" said the old man, seizing his arm and shaking it.

The buzzard had suddenly reappeared, beating its wings so violently that to the five astonished men it sounded like a waterfall. The frantic bird uttered hoarse, terrified cries, thrashing the air

heavily. It was apparently working to lift some tremendous weight. The cries ceased abruptly, as the bird seemed to erupt above the foliage. It was heavily laden with what could only be a vine, which was entangled in its claws and dangled with many lively twists, dropping earth from the curling, whipping roots as the bird circled wearily higher and higher above the woods—higher and higher, till the silent, gaping circle of watchers strained their eyes to see. And then, when the great black buzzard, like a living kite with its grotesque tail, was almost beyond vision above them, the vine dropped away. It fell as though weighted, roots first. Behind its downward plunge trailed a little flurry of leaves that had been torn away. The vine plummeted into the trees with a distant, leafy uproar in almost precisely the same spot from which it had issued. And when the five gaping watchers looked again into the sky the great buzzard was nowhere to be seen.

FROM the central chamber of the laboratories a watcher commanded at least a fifteen-mile view across the plains. This morning a tall, gray man was standing at the windows, looking out thoughtfully with keen blue eyes. From where he stood he could just make out the group of men now straggling away from the front of Sholla's house. He was smiling tolerantly.

"What cheer, fellow citizen?" said a voice behind him.

"Oh, hello, Schommer," said Haverland, turning around. "Why, it's those confounded birds again. They don't seem to like these woods at all. I can't imagine what the devil has got into 'em. We'll have to beat them up one of these days and see whether there's a hungry critter or two down there. Set traps."

"Yes," said Schommer, blinking away the dregs of sleep. "Why, I haven't seen even a squirrel around here since—well, since poor Keene got his."

That was three months ago. Haverland remembered it with regret and a great deal of embarrassment. To his complete shame, whatever it was that Keene, the senior engineer, had been working on—and those projects of his were remote enough—Haverland had destroyed. When Keene had been electrocuted, Haverland and the newcomer, Harriss, had been assisting in his experiment. Schommer stood just back of Keene. There was one peculiar aspect of the affair that Haverland thought of afterward as a remarkable, if peculiar, conception of his own. At any rate, it seemed to have been a phenomenon witnessed only by himself.

Keene had stretched forth a lean hand, and the bare wire had crossed his wrist. And then there was light, like a halo.

From where Haverland stood, watching through the poles of two huge electrodes, between which was fixed a bulb of one of the inert gases, Keene's body seemed to be aflame. He stood there like a waxwork, moments after Haverland had disconnected the current. Phosphorescent fires chased up and down his arms, and the exposed flesh of his breast and face seemed to be burning. The soft radiance brightened gradually. Harriss and Schommer, apparently blind to this aurora of light, gaped at their chief fearfully. The radiation of light was now sharply brilliant, and as Haverland gasped at its brightness there was a violent explosion of radiant energy from Keene's head that shocked him into temporary blindness.

It was a stupid, an unforgivable thing to do; it irritated Haverland to think he could be capable of such carelessness. That bulb of gas, in which had appeared

a deposit of transparent, flowing crystals, might have had some important bearing on the nature of Keene's mystical and complex experiments. One almost dared suppose that the impossible was sometimes possible, and that perhaps in this one case the inert gas, or combination of inert gases, that Keene had been working on was active after all.

Still, who would know the subtle ways of Agnes, the laboratory cat? It was all chance: that it was high noon when Keene died, that the hungry cat was mewing on the central table, and that when Haverland set the mysterious bulb with its more mysterious contents on the table the affectionate Agnes pawed it, caused it to roll into the sink compartment and shatter. All chance, and yet Haverland could only blame himself for a fool's negligence.

But that radiation of light from Keene's dying body was something to be considered. In Haverland's own idiom, it was "one for the books." Halo. The legendary gods of Greece and Rome, robed in light. The death light. The ancient gods of India, the primitive deities of all countries, even unto Christ and the Christian saints, all enhaloed. Tradition somewhere originates in truth, and in the time-forgotten genesis of that shining legend, the legend of the halo, was the simple function of a physical law, a mystery once visible. Haverland shook his head. There were more fools with their follies. . . .

As he entered his own private laboratory, leaving Schommer to luxurious yawns, he thought again of that curious, inexplicable deposit of crystals in the bulb of stable gas—crystals that seemed to be composed of microcosmic glass beads by the billion, and that surely had an involved, slow, endless motion of their own. Haverland felt that he was peering into the unknown, and again and again the sensation of his personal connection with the death of Keene filled him with uneasiness and with shame, as though he had committed some vast error.

He noted something unusual in the condition of his room, and stopped short. At the end of the laboratory table the window had been broken, possibly by a vine which passed through the opening. The vine twisted along the table top, and was entangled in Haverland's microscope. A pile of glass slides was knocked down. Several had fallen to the floor and shattered.

Haverland toed the fragments irritably. A great deal of damage had been done. He started to untangle the vine from the microscope and crowd it back through the window, swearing mildly to himself, then dropped it and pulled absently at his lower lip, perplexed. It struck him suddenly as being very, very odd that a clumsy, meandering growth like this tortuous creeper should have worked so much of itself into the room.

Some four or five days later Haverland experienced a moment of pure fright. The window had been repaired, but was now open. Haverland sat on the sill, looking over rolling country that was farmed by the hunkies of South. He could see a fan of men spreading through a distant plowed field, for what, he didn't know. As he watched, he was aware of something crawling along his bare forearm. A small beetle, a fly. He brushed it off, then froze in position, panic-stricken. The beetle was not a beetle at all, but a tendril of the vine that grew outside the window. In one eternal minute he took account of many things: of the fact that the vine, which had never been any more remarkable than any of its kind, was now unimaginably luxuriant, hanging from the side of the building in a

vast cloud of leaves; of the fact that a pungent, unpleasant odor moved about and among this cloud; and that a small tendril of this inexplicable new growth was visibly insinuating its way along his forearm.

HAVERLAND had watched the slow unfolding of the cereus, but this thing crept along like a wooden worm vested in leaves. It was encircling his arm deliberately. The delicate shoots seemed to be freckled with infinitesimal suckers, and wherever they touched they clung. Haverland plucked at the thing and it resisted. Suddenly it seemed to grow into his flesh. With the shock of pain the engineer snatched it violently from his arm and flung it out. The thing had been sucking his blood.

Vegetable vampires!

All along his arm were tiny red beads, like a perspiration of blood, as though he had been pricked with a thousand needles all at once. At this moment there was an impatient rapping at the door. It was Schommer.

"Grave-robbers," he said shortly, and with an expression on his face that Haverland was not to forget.

"What?" he said, astonished.

Schommer's blue eyes glared.

"They've dug him up," he said furiously. To which he added, meeting Haverland's blank look, "Keene."

Keene had been buried at the bottom of the hill according to his own often-expressed wish. Schommer and Haverland, hastening toward the small cleared plot that contained his grave, could see nothing until they reached the place because of the foliage-banked iron grillework around it. Then Haverland stopped dead, dismayed, while Schommer watched him grimly, almost accusingly, thought Haverland. The grave was torn up. Plowed up. A few bars of the grille were bent, and impaled on the spears of these bars was Keene's body. It had apparently been so displaced for some time, vines having partially enwrapped it and broken into the flesh.

"When did you discover it?" asked Haverland, appalled.

"Only this morning. My wife reminds me to put flowers on the grave once a week." Schommer pointed to a scattered bunch of flowers on the ground—fresh flowers, and the dried stalks of the past. "Now, who would do this thing?" he said bitterly, looking at Haverland. Then he was silent.

Afterward, though, the whole horror of it seemed to be crystallized in something almost irrelevant. When the body was removed to the cemetery in town, it had first to be disengaged from those horrible vines. The trained eyes of Haverland and Schommer were alone in seeing that the flesh in nearest conjunction with the vines presented a most remarkable appearance. It looked raw. Haverland thought of the word "digested." Schommer was staring at him. And Haverland looked at Schommer, while the disgusted deputies of South's coroner quickly practised their trade.

The potentialities of the vine. Vines that climb, and vines that hang. Creepers that find their ways upward to the sun. Tough vines that bind, vines that clutch and choke, that gripe the best life out of the vegetation that gives them foothold. The gleaming, wholly denuded skeleton of a squirrel, still intact, entangled in the vine that girdled the body of Keene.

Keene's death seemed in some way to have laid a curse over the woods and the small game that inhabited them. The three months afterward were a chronicle of desertion, the small cries of birds and

the chuckling calls of wild things decreasing in number day by day till there were only long silences, broken by sounds that could not be identified. The quick, flying skip of a rabbit was as rare now as the cadenced flight of the jay and the gull. The pleasant, frightened movement of wild things disturbed and the splash of leaves had given place to queer, long, meaningless rustles; rustles that marked the insinuating course of large snakes, or perhaps the rustles of heavy vines, that, overweighted, were dropping by degrees from their places among the oaks, the birches, and the cottonwoods. Continuous movements unseen. The threat of invisibles.

EXCEPT when some problem kept him in the building overnight, Haverland habitually rode into the city with Schommer. And both men were thankful for Schommer's car. It was a good three-quarters of a mile from the laboratories into South, and the dense woods, denser now with this monstrous new growth of underbrush, overhung the road all the way. A lonely walk, at night.

"Not even an owl," said Schommer. "Used to be a lot of them."

He was driving slowly, and now stopped the car to listen. Not a sound of bird or beast. He looked at Haverland, who had his lean gray head cocked forward listening intently.

"This place is like a cellar," Schommer continued, in his peculiar clipped style of speech. "Nothing moving; not a sound. Even a beastly smell."

His broad lips curled with displeasure as he released the brake and the car began to move.

"Wait!" said Haverland, gripping his arm.

Schommer looked at him inquiringly, then thrust his head farther out of the window to listen also. There was never a sound; the woods were deathly still.

"Hear something?" he asked skeptically. "Only living thing I've seen around here in three months was our friend the buzzard this morning. *C. a. septentrionalis,* and for such a big one even he didn't stay long."

"Listen!" said the sharp-eared Haverland, and with so commanding a voice that Schommer obeyed, opening the door and stepping outside the car.

At once there was an explosion of sound in the woods near by. The air was filled with outburst after outburst of agonized cries, cries that seemed to be neither brute nor human.

Schommer snatched a flashlight from the pocket of the car and plunged through the brush at the side of the road, Haverland following. They had scarcely entered the woods, the beam of light playing through the leaves ahead of them, when the uproar terminated in a cutting scream. They advanced through the woods hastily, still hearing an unaccountable, wild thrashing sound close at hand.

When they found the origin of the disturbance not fifty feet within the woods, they stopped, gasping with horror. All about them were trees hung with vines. Directly in front of them was a large specimen at the foot of a huge cottonwood, in movement. It was thrashing about like a whip. The end of it was wound tightly about some object, which, as they watched it thrown bloodily against the trunks of the cottonwood and the surrounding trees, they saw was a dog.

Schommer ran forward for a closer view.

"Stop, you fool!" shouted Haverland instinctively, and at that moment a creeper on the ground entangled itself in Schommer's leg and tripped him headlong. He tried to get up and found him-

self tied hand and foot. Tender young vines enwound his wrists and ankles like steel wires; he wrestled with them, grunting with pain.

Cannibalism. Kind eating kind. Haverland stood there nerveless, and felt, sickeningly, that he was looking again into the unknown. When Schommer fell, the light had been thrown from his hand, and now shone directly on the base of the cottonwood. The vine moved slightly, like a tentacle, as though the dog somewhere off in the darkness were still struggling to free itself, slowly. Schommer was still trying to raise himself from the ground, the great veins of his neck and forehead standing out darkly in the oblique light of the flash.

"I'm caught!" he said helplessly, and then cried out with terror as a creeper cut into one fleshy wrist and made a bracelet of spouting blood.

"Help! Help me!" he screamed. At which Haverland, nervously aware of black, black shadows banked on shadows blacker still among the depths of the tall trees, stumbled blindly forward, produced a knife from his pocket and flicked it open. The vine holding the dog was perfectly still then, and Schommer suddenly managed to free himself; upon which, having brushed off his clothes, he proceeded to bind up his wrist with a handkerchief. Then, feeling highly resentful, and perhaps a little foolish because of the wholly deserted character of the still woods, he picked up the flashlight and directed it toward the ground at his feet.

"Well, that's funny," he said, taking up the vine that had tripped him and dropping it again. "Did you ever see any wood like that?"

The vine was limp, flabby, and draped along the ground like a leafy rope. Schommer stepped on it, and grimaced as it gave under his heel like flesh.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed. "What the devil do you suppose it is? Never saw anything like it!"

Haverland examined the root of the vine, and was about to draw his knife through it. But there was a windless rustle in the trees, and the vine, which had been lying as loose as a newly dead snake, and as cold, was now rigid and hard in his hand. He caught the fleeting impression that he was the object of eery, unearthly attention. He felt that he was threatened. The woods were now completely still, watching, waiting; the silence was a tangible menace, suffocating him, moving against him.

"Shall we take it along?" asked Schommer. "Might have to get a spade, unless——"

He stooped over and gripped the vine at its base, now quite limp, and tried to pull it out by the roots. Haverland held the light. Schommer was generously built, and his contorted face showed tremendous exertion, but the vine wouldn't give an inch. As he straightened up, nursing his wrist and swearing softly, Haverland saw the root of the creeper withdraw fractionally into the ground, for all the world like an earthworm.

"Hm-m," said Schommer, clearing his throat. "Queer vine, that. How about the other one?"

"Let's go see," said Haverland, and walked carefully through the dark litter of brush toward the big cottonwood, holding the light before him.

The vine that had trapped the dog was a large climber. Closely involved in its foliage was the dead, mangled animal, which he stooped to examine. Schommer grasped the main stem of the plant and shook it experimentally; it seemed to have the character of any other vine, but

when he turned aside to toe the battered, bloody ruin of the dog, the vine wobbled drunkenly.

Compact, gnarled arms of fiber that thought. Intricately contrived, sap-carrying tubes, sap that pulsed, sap that beat through wooden arms. Arms that looked about for supporting trees and moved deliberately like the tentacles of a land octopus. Haverland shivered with the thought. He received the uncomfortable impression that he had entered a stranger's house by some freak, or had the dubious privilege of wandering through the devil's own garden, of being tolerated in that journey.

"Let's get out of this, Schommer," said Haverland. "We can look this thing over in the daytime." He tried to make his voice sound casual, but the words came out harsh and knotty.

Schommer joined him, and as the two picked their way back to the car he said, "What the devil do you suppose happened to that dog?"

"Looked like some cat's work," Haverland lied; "probably the beast that's been accounting for all the game that's disappeared. Got away before either of us saw him."

Schommer shook his massive, leonine head. No cat in the country was big enough to kill a dog so horribly. Why, the thing he had touched with his foot was no more than shreds, a red puddle of flesh and splintered bones. No, it was a stronger, more savage beast than a cat. A beast so thorough and so subtle in its destruction that it absorbed living things into itself without its existence being suspected.

A LIGHT breeze moved through the woods as the two engineers approached the car, a moist, muggy breeze, and the grove of cottonwoods below the laboratory was filled with sound. The majestic trees were scarcely distinguishable against the black sky, but fireflies illuminated the foliage here and there, and briefly showed vast and looming walls of leaves and branches, in whose enclosure the two men at the car seemed to be at the bottom of a well of shadows. The effect was that of a great beast lying prone and still which had suddenly commenced to breathe. There was no freshness in the air, rather the effluvia pouring out of a boundless swamp. The sensitive Haverland harkened to the sound of the night breeze through the leaves, and noted the peculiar leatheriness of their motion and collision with each other. The familiar, fresh sound of the wind playing through poplars and cottonwoods had taken on the character of a confident, jubilant, multitudinous handclapping.

He remembered that sound. Later, among the realities of his home in the city, those engulfing shadows flocked about him and marched endlessly through his dreams, through dreams of leafy cordings and living ropes, dreams of phosphorescent foliage and vines enhaloed, all sounding before the violence of cyclonic winds that blew the radiance into flame.

Hurried, harried by dreads and he knew not what, next day he busied himself with an apparatus which he had set up in his rooms a day or two before. This consisted chiefly of a microscope and a common broad beaker. In the beaker, and filling it to the brim, was a pulpy mass in which could be discerned indisputable chlorophyl; leaves ground into a kind of rough paste; macerated vines with their foliage, which he had clipped from the creeper outside the window (the writhing, the leaping, and the voiceless fury). Near the microscope was a delicate, graduated instrument used for some kind of measurement. Alongside the

microscope stood a small glass-stoppered bottle nearly full of a transparent umber fluid which had been expressed from the pulp.

Still doubtful, hesitating, never convinced, Haverland delayed his investigation one moment more. He approached a locker and removed from it a soggy paper package. With as much deliberation as he could muster, he opened it and produced a large piece of raw meat. He walked to the window with it, opened the window, and then, lingering still, stepped back. Wind outside plucked at the tower of vines, and its whole length undulated with a confusion of whispers.

Haverland wiped his brow, sagging with perspiration, and flung the meat outside. The vine thrashed out across the window. In a moment the meat had been torn into minute shreds, and the whole disappeared among the foliage. Haverland slammed the window and leaned against it. When the leaves patted the glass against his back he sobbed. Pound after pound of fresh, raw meat, vanishing thus in midair. Below the window, if he desired to look, was a sprinkling of clean-picked bones, even to the skeleton of a bird or two. There remained one certain test which the engineer felt was final.

As he stood before the odd collection of objects on the laboratory table, silent and thoughtful, he was aware of remarkable hootings and whisperings outside the building. It was as though the wind, finding small apertures and irregularities in the construction of the place, were deriding him and his work, making sport of his loneliness.

The day had been overcast. The light breeze that had begun the day before had blown up banks of clouds all day long, till by late afternoon the sky was obscured with a thick, uninterrupted blanket the color of dusty metal, that seemed to serve as a sounding-board for dull thunders in the distance.

SCHOMMER, since he lived near by and wanted to finish up the business of the night before, had called for his chief in the morning. Early as they were, when they had passed through South and entered the road leading through the woods below the South laboratories they found their way blocked by a man at work.

Eric Shane, who lived at the far end of South, was one of the more capable laborers among the community of foreigners. Because of his war record, when such things were of importance in employment, he held the position of road patrolman along the network leading out of South. His grader, built after the fashion of the war-time tanks with which he was familiar, was stalled in the middle of the road. He was proceeding on foot along the ditch at one side, industriously wielding a scythe. At the sound of Schommer's brakes he turned about.

After observing the two in the car silently for a moment, he said deliberately,

"Wery juicy."

"What's that, Eric?" asked Schommer.

"The wines. Wery juicy," Shane repeated. He held out his scythe, from which yellow sap was dripping.

"Vines? Well," said Schommer, puzzled, "what're you cutting 'em for?"

"Big fellahs," said Shane, shaking his head. "Across the road, blowing around from the wind. Lots easier to cut."

"I don't see any," said Schommer, craning his neck to look beyond the grader. "Cut the rest of them already?"

Shane looked steadily up the road, then stared owlishly at the two engineers as though he had seen them for the first time.

"Maybe, maybe not," he said. "I ain't been vorking wery long. I t'ink maybe vind blow him back."

He picked up the creeper he had just slashed and threw it hastily into the woods, delivering a kick at one heavy, dragging end of it. Then he wiped his sap-stained hands on his coveralls and looked at Schommer shyly.

"Should I move him?" he asked, pointing to the grader.

"Later," said Schommer. "We've got a little job for you in the woods. Bring along your spade."

Eric unhooked the spade from the grader and looked at it perplexed as he followed Schommer and Haverland through the brush. In a moment the three men arrived at a spot where the ground was broadly disturbed.

"This is it," said Schommer.

"Minus the dog," said Haverland, staring at his companion. He was suddenly filled with a great wrath, and a hatred enough to drive out any fear of the unknown. The great creeper that had been lying on the ground at the base of the cottonwood now mounted upward and was lost among the foliage of the tree. There was no trace of the dog.

Both Schommer and Haverland advanced to the base of the vine and looked about.

"X marks the spot," said Schommer grimly. He scraped a cross into the ground with one foot, where lay a loose scattering of splintered bones. "Marrow and all," he continued. "Nothing left but splinters."

It was uncommonly dark in the woods, for today there was no sun. Eric looked all around carefully, then planted his shovel firmly in the soft earth. He eyed the two engineers earnestly and rather uneasily as they examined the creeper wound all about the cottonwood.

"The devil! That's a big fellow, Charlie," said Schommer. "That surely can't be the one we saw lying on the ground last night."

Haverland shrugged. The vine was thick as a small tree, but it was as gnarled and twisted as though it had been through torture.

"You know," he said, "this is all kind of backward. I've seen wind tear a vine free, but blowing it back up is a horse of another color."

"I don' like it," said Eric. The air was charged with a musty, pungent animal smell, at which he wrinkled his nose with dislike. "I t'ink maybe I better go now."

"O. K., Eric," said Schommer. "We don't need you after all."

As he turned around, and Haverland stooped to examine the bark of the vine, there was a rustle in the foliage overhead that was not caused by any wind. It was the sound of innumerable bats in flight, the sound of leather in motion. Eric jumped up and down with excitement, his jaws moving soundlessly as he pointed. Schommer stared at him, marveling.

"Watch himself! Watch himself!" shouted the Finn, finding his voice. "*Wine come!*"

Schommer glanced up, then snatched at Haverland and hurled himself forward. The two men sprawled headlong as the "wine" slipped from the tree and fell behind them. The leaves of the vine were massed like a great green mushroom, and the whole growth fell limply and heavily, all at once, smothering the base of the cottonwood with a thud, in a solid mound of foliage.

"Well, I *will* be damned!" said Schommer, finding his feet and brushing himself off. "Now, what do you suppose made that happen?"

"It fell," said Haverland slowly, as if to himself. "Simply came loose and fell,

in a heap. And we were directly beneath it."

"Looks as though someone were wishing us a lot of bad luck," said Schommer, laughing nervously. "Now, if I were superstitious——"

HAVERLAND said nothing, but he was subdued as he tramped back to the car with Schommer. He had seen what Schommer had not seen, just before the vine had fallen. That vine had a most unnatural surface of flexible, wrinkled wood, all covered with a kind of unholy sweat. The crevices of the bark were thickly packed with parasites, countless numbers of small insects which conceivably could only be battening on the vine itself. These insects were lice, uncommonly large, well-fed lice in great numbers. He considered this phenomenon judiciously and humorously as the car left the grader behind (with the panting, exhausted Eric) and mounted the drive to the garage behind the laboratories. Half-way up the drive his restless eyes saw something new.

"We're late," he said, breaking the silence. "That's sloppy work, too."

"Eh?" Schommer was surprized out of a mood of his own. When he had locked the car and issued from the garage with Haverland he looked at his watch.

"As a matter of fact, Charlie," he said, "we're early. Only ten minutes to."

Haverland verified the time with a glance at his own timepiece. Then he looked mystified down the hill and said,

"Plumbers are early, then. They've 'dug in."

"Where?" asked Schommer, puzzled, as he loaded his pipe. Haverland pointed toward an oak near the bottom of the hill, where the ground was spaded up.

"Something clogged up the drain," he said. "Probably the roots of that tree. Looks as though they've used a plow, doesn't it?"

Schommer squinted at the tree without recognition. The turf was broken all the way down the lawn, so that clods formed a rough ditch running from the walls of the laboratory directly into the tree.

"Sloppy work," repeated Haverland, shaking his head.

Schommer removed the pipe from his teeth and followed the course of the ditch with troubled eyes. Something beyond the tree attracted him; he walked a few paces down the lawn. The ditch continued on the other side of the tree, to the extreme bottom of the hill. Curious technique—as though the plumbers were hunting for the tree and couldn't find it. Haverland, slowly taking his place beside Schommer, saw the loose flesh of Schommer's face harden, tighten, till he seemed ten years younger.

Schommer raised his arm and pointed at the tree with his pipe as though it were a target and the pipe a gun. Then he looked at Haverland with eyes whose perplexity had something also of terror.

"Wonderful!" he ejaculated. "Charlie, that tree wasn't there before!"

"What?"

"No! The hill has always been clear. That tree is a good twenty paces up!"

"Schommer——" said Haverland through his teeth. Then he checked himself; no need yet for the wild statements he could make. After all, no one could be really sure, really certain that the fantastic things he suspected had any basis in fact. He was silent. Schommer only regarded him curiously, placing the pipe again between his teeth. Then he drew hurriedly against the almost dead fire in the bowl as Haverland proceeded farther down the hill. An oak tree, that looked all of a hundred years old. Immovable

as rock. A fresh leaf sailed out of the foliage and reached the ground about ten feet in front of him. He picked it up absently, and as he stood there for a moment, genuinely troubled, he twisted the leaf idly in his fingers and noted that it was as limp and as tough as leather. He turned slowly and retraced his steps up the hill.

More of those leaves, and the leaves of other trees in the woods, flapped against the windows of the building during the day. The wind was steadily rising. Leaves like patterns cut in the skins of animals.

Some time ago, there was that item in the local paper concerning the tree that had moved. The Laboratories people told jokes about the ignorance and superstitions of the people who lived in South: how the hunkies hated the whine of the generators, the complicated glass and metal apparatus, and the living blue sparks that jumped all over the laboratories like fireflies. But finally the tree had left the yard entirely to stand at the edge of the woods. Now there was an investigation; sliding substrata were discovered, in which the roots were involved. Odd that the layer of earth should have moved uphill! And now a tree on the very hill on which the laboratories were built, playing the same tricks, tearing up the sod.

DURING the day Haverland several times discovered Schommer standing at the window area looking down speculatively at the woods. Young Harriss had the phenomenon pointed out to him, and twice left his work to make an examination. Cowl shrugged; he would not have been surprized if a hen had crowed after laying an egg.

The plumbers did come in the afternoon. Having taken a sounding from the building they dug in at a point midway between the tree and the laboratories. Advantage was taken of the ditch in the turf, since it was discovered that below it, down to the sewer, was a cleavage line of broken, friable earth. It was as though a giant plow had followed the sewer-pipe from end to end, breaking the ground. Actually, one of the extraordinarily long roots of the oak tree had entered a joint in the pipes. All manner of refuse had caught on the obstruction and damned the sewer effectively. The difficulties of repair, however, were negligible.

By this time the wind outside had become rather heavy, in the midst of which the laboratories were an isolated calm. The wind occasionally gusted with still increasing violence, and now and then small objects struck the walls and windows with faint rappings. Haverland could fancy he heard shoutings from down the hill; there was a waterfall of sound among the cottonwoods. At this moment the night-bell rang.

With some degree of surprize and curiosity he left his chambers to see what was wanted. He was alone in the building, it was late, and this was a place where few visitors came. He had locked the door, of course, after Schommer had gone at last; and now, to his further surprize, there was no one on the steps when he opened it. He stood there in the doorway wondering. It was those queer little dark people in South, and their total lack of comprehension of the purpose in these researches, their distrust of everything mechanical, and their absolute fear of electricity; but it was rather a quaint expression of hatred, to ring the bell because the machinery whined. Annoying, too.

It was an unlucky night for ignorant, fearful people, though. The sky was heavy with storm, and the wind was

speaking angrily through the cottonwoods. A handful of glossy leaves swept up the hill, and a creeper which had been torn from the side of the building blew across the walk and was shaken against the steps. Haverland locked the door and walked slowly back to his table.

Mysterious. Something grimly facetious about the whole business. All the earmarks of a practical joke on a grand scale. Trees that move. Vines that plummet down fatly from trees that hold them like great green spiders. Game gradually and wantonly slaughtered; skeletons and splintered bones scattered all through the woods. Something in the woods concealed, foul-smelling enough to attract a ranging turkey buzzard. Vines, spongy with sap, blowing around in the road with the slightest breeze. A laborer's fear of still, disinhabited woods, and his flight from them. A vine had tripped Schommer, and so held him that he became frightened. Vines clustering along the road that provided the only means of approach or retreat to the laboratories. Blowing across it. The way Haverland came to work and went home. Vines tough enough to stop a road grader. The voice of Eric Shane, saying, "Wery juicy."

Vines.

Anger filled him again, and he exclaimed aloud, "It's a lie!"

But the walls of the building flung the shout into a trail of echoes; from some remote corner of his brain he plucked out the impression of a bulb of sliding crystals, that Agnes, the laboratory cat, had broken into the sink. Down the sewer, down the hill, into the woods. A thirsty oak, mounting the hill along the sewer, using its roots like the tentacles of an enfoliaged devil-fish, a wooden mole. In this whirl of half-thoughts he found the skeleton of the cat outside his own window, the bones completely disarticulated, but still recognizable. He heard the voice of Eric Shane say,

"I hear' a cat scream—one time, two times, up those hill'."

There was something deadly in the woods. A killer that worked ceaselessly, stealthily, that was not caught in any trap set for it.

In the meantime the first few drops of rain were being flung against the windows with smart rappings like thrown sand. The vine that had been torn from the walls thrashed against the building and occasionally struck the windows in the central chamber with that brittle, short sound peculiar to glass.

Haverland hesitated only a moment as pale violet lightning flickered among the clouds, then turned to the microscope on the table. He prepared a slide cleverly, like a magician's trick, and slipped it under his lenses. One certain test. He adjusted his focus, found something, and rigged up the delicate, graduated instrument that was apparently intended for some occult measurement. There he sat, hands on hips, peering, his face as grim as death. His thin lips recited some ritual without sound.

"Yes, Schommer," he heard himself saying, "those are mighty queer vines; you can tell me nothing. Do you know there's salt in their sweat, eh? Did you know their sap clots? That it takes a blood count, like your blood and mine? *Ever hear 'em talking to each other at night in those cursed woods with their damned clicks, and rubbings, and whispers?* What do you suppose they talk about? *Death!*"

But Schommer was far away in the city, asleep by now. Haverland leaped to his feet and knocked the microscope crashing to the floor. He had a grim purpose in mind, but even now was arrested by the second ringing of the bell, which

broke the comparative silence in the building in the most startling manner.

It was a late hour for anyone to return, and the hunkies of South had all rather sleep in coffins than come anywhere near this place. The bell continued to ring as he made his way to the door. Someone out there was passionately, or mischievously, ringing the bell again and again. Longs and shorts. Staccato rings in series, rings that set the nerves on edge; a whole wild, weird variety of ringings by some impatient lunatic. The bell still sounded alarmingly when he reached the door, which he snatched open at once. The steps were devoid of any presence but his own.

Nearly hysterical with exasperation, Haverland looked into the black, wrathful night, but not for long. A blockade of vines crowded up the steps with a rush, and advancing tendrils whipped through the doorway. Haverland flung the door to with a re-echoing crash. A few short lengths of the vine were caught in the crack, and there they writhed, like the sprouting tails of snakes. One he gripped, which instantaneously snapped about his wrist and entered the flesh. He cried out with pain; taking a shorter grip on the vine with his other hand, at the same time bracing his feet against the door, he tugged with all his might, gasping with panic. It was like trying to break a wet leather thong, but the gods gave him the advantage of weight and terror. The vine parted abruptly; he caught himself as he staggered crazily past the first of the series of generators that ran back from the door.

It was the thing that had nearly got Schommer. Vines gone soft; vines turned animal. Vines as flexible as rubber. Vines whose wooden hearts had been turned into some kind of unholy flesh, vile with rich, putrid yellow sap. Those tendrils remaining in the door writhed spasmodically; there was a heavy scraping sound, and they were withdrawn through the crack with a powerful jerk, leaving a leaf or two in the room. Haverland still held the piece that had broken off. It was quite limp, like a rounded, dirty strip of flesh, and was bleeding that sticky, pale yellow sap into his hand. He flung the thing away across the floor and walked unsteadily back to his rooms, drawing the palms of his hands heavily down his cheeks. He could hear vines beating against the door and grinding along the walls, unimaginable vines, foul things that were hosts to billions of lice. There was something definite and malicious in their movement as they worked along the window-ledges, tapping at the panes that were now streaming with moisture.

In the downpour outside, the trees in the woods arched and lashed the air with foliage. Haverland listened bewildered to the stunning impact of barrage after barrage of thunder, and fancied that the living voices that issued from the grove of cottonwoods were many times multiplied. Then the lights throughout the laboratories brightened unbearably. As the engineer approached the end of his table the lights went out. The wires had gone down in the storm.

He stumbled over some rope-like thing on the floor, and noticed wildly as he fell that the window was open. Something had come in. He reached out in the darkness, however splintered with lightnings, and found it, pulled at it. Clutching it was like squeezing the compact, corded flesh of a squid. A long, eel-shaped thing that passed through the window into the outside.

At that moment ragged lightning seemed to tear the southern sky in two,

answered by an eruption of light in the north. As the following thunder battered the place with sound, Haverland stood up thrilling. He had a brilliant vision of the dying Keene; for indeed, this again was the legendary halo. The two colossal charges of electricity in the sky seemed to serve as electrodes, each bolt a pole, the laboratory between; and in this room the halo appeared once more, just as Haverland had seen it over the tube of gas three months past. There was a full, mysterious effulgence throughout the room. A pale, thin radiance flowed out from the thing on the floor and filled the room with a glory of soft light. By this illumination the engineer saw that it was really a denuded length of vine, now more like a hideous, tapering worm; saw, too, that there was scarcely a leaf remaining on the tangle of vines at the window. In the glory of the halo these boneless arms serpentined in a terrible dance; every tentacle glittered with sweat in small beads, that winked at the lightning like innumerable eyes. The vine in the room began to raise itself from the floor.

And now, having formed a towering, closed palisade about it, and accompanied by the sound of shouting leaves and colliding trunks, the vine-hung grove of cottonwoods was advancing on the house. It was the sound of earthquake; the hill shook, and metal clanged in the central chamber of the laboratories. Followed a stupendous crash. Haverland hurried to the door, half stunned.

Through the broad windows of this central chamber one commanded a view of the entire countryside. The hill itself was just high enough to permit sight over the foliaged heads of the oaks and cottonwoods. Haverland, looking down at the trees, saw the entire woods bathed in cold flame. The grove was one vast phosphorescence. The tree-trunks glowed, and the masses of leaves shone like soft, burnished metal. All the great vines were alive with light, and hung from the trees in waterfalls of flame. It was a thing seen in a nightmare or read in a fairy-tale. Another Birnam Wood, that was coming by degrees, but surely, toward the central point that was the laboratories. The laboratory hill seemed to rise from a chasm whose walls were solid light. Trees and vines in motion. Before their advancing trunks and stems the earth was rolling away in waves. Then, dark off in one end of the chamber, the engineer saw that the oak on the hill had already entered the building. The end generator had been shouldered aside and crashed through the floor into the basement. Commotion was in the air. The storm entered the chamber with the oak, and rain beat on Haverland's face.

And still it was not too late. The engineer whirled and retreated through his own laboratories, leaping the handful of twining creepers in his way. In the back of the building he picked up a sledge-hammer, then raced back through the smother of rain to the garage, in which stood three full drums of gasoline. He ran up the incline on which the drums rested, and worked rapidly with a wrench. He stepped back a little, swung the sledge in one heavy blow. The drums, released, tumbled booming down the runway, spilling their contents as they went, and bounded out the doorway to go careering down the hill.

Haverland waited, dripping with rain and perspiration, then produced a box of matches. As he was about to strike a light the heavens gaped and a volcano of flame plunged cracking and thundering into the woods like the finger of God.

Haverland flung himself out of the garage in time to escape the arm of fire

that leaped up the hill. From the back of the laboratories he watched a tower of flame boom up in the declining storm. Above low thunders he heard three successive explosions as the gasoline drums went. There was enough of it, he felt, to suffocate, if not to consume. A shift of wind carried the sound of crackling and hissing vegetation, and carried into the engineer's nostrils the charnel stench of all the pyres of history. Sickened, he stumbled back into the laboratories.

THE following day dawned calm and clear. Roman Sholla came out early and stood on his front lawn, smoking his pipe deliberately and looking up at the hill. A crew had appeared several hours before, and were making much noise as they repaired the damage done to the laboratories by a falling oak. There had been a strong, unpleasant odor in the air all morning, which likely enough came with the shift of the wind from the packing-plant in the city. The members of the crew, as one occasionally came down into South, found the work distasteful, the stench seemingly worse the higher one got up the hill.

One man alone in the building, the chief engineer, Haverland, had escaped serious injury when lightning had touched off three drums of gasoline in the garage and burned it. The South woods had suffered heavily, with a number of the trees and the extraordinarily large vines that grew here either totally burned or badly charred. The famous oak that had taken a journey away from Sholla's own yard, though not burned, was now dead, its leaves already withered.

Eric Shane came out presently, scratching his head and blinking cautiously. He and Sholla were joined shortly by little Fred Yanotsky and Papa Freng. Sholla, situated as he was nearest the laboratory, took on some importance. He told how the storm had wakened him. The woods had caught on fire somehow, and three explosions ("when those gasoline go off") illuminated the room he slept in.

"It was one big bonfire," he said, holding out his arms.

He told of seeing the lightning strike.

"Big," he said helplessly, shaking his head. The bolt was indescribably huge. He could tell of the sharp burned-leather and ozone smell in the air afterward, though, and did. But the thunder, ah! They all remembered that sound of cataclysm when the big bolt struck, but that could not be described either.

Sholla's three friends were silent. They had said nothing yet, and seemed very much satisfied about something as they looked up at the crew busy at the shattered masonry and twisted metal above them.

"Well, Fred," said Sholla, "what you think of it, eh?"

"I t'ink," said dark little Yanotsky, "maybe it vas a good t'ing if *all* the plant fall in. Never, no good come of machines."

"Ah!" said Sholla contemptuously. "Always the same. Crazy stubborn like your father. You should go to school, Fred Yanotsky."

"This morning," said white-haired Papa Freng, "a squirrel came to my window for nuts. He was very tame, and the first I have seen in a long time." His eyes were fixed on the dreaming distance. As he spoke, something moving near by brought him to sharp attention. With something of eagerness in his voice he exclaimed, "Look!"

He pointed up the road. A small cottontail, pursuing a rather aimless course of exploration or foraging, was proceeding along the ditch, nibbling at green

shoots. Its way was blocked presently by a creeper that lay along the road and sagged under its own weight. It was remarkable in being almost totally leafless.

The rabbit, in skipping over it, suddenly froze, as beast does in the presence of beast. But if the grotesque old Keene had been responsible for the mockery of sentience in these singular growths of South, his ghost must have rested at last. The watchers saw the rabbit pass carelessly, unmolested, over the stiff tangle of vines and disappear among the ruins of the South woods. Roman Sholla walked the few paces up to the vine, and, toeing its snarled trunks and leafless tendrills, said,

"Dead."

Sable Revery

(Written to music)

By ROBERT NELSON

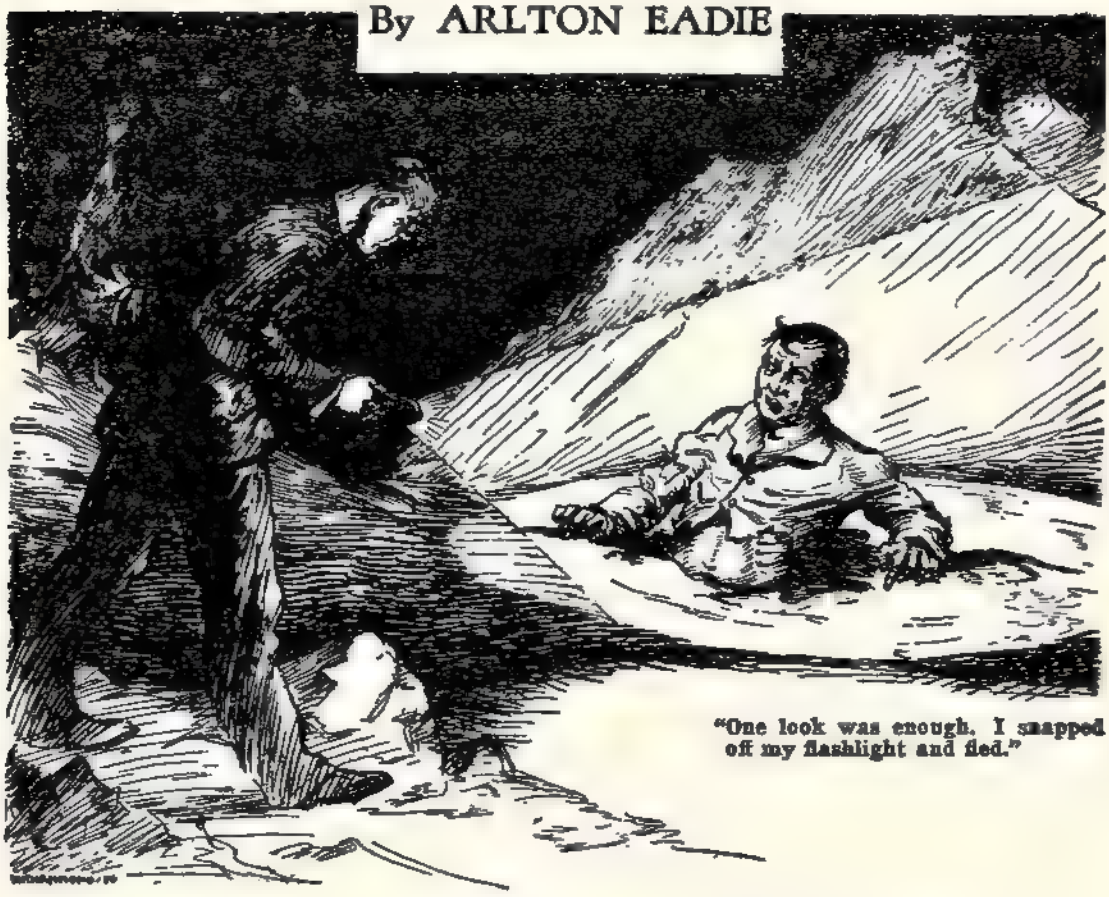
Black roses sprout across the sky,
Pipes sing insensate 'neath the sea,
The clamant heads of madmen fly
And shatter with a dark outcry,
As tones transpose to deeper dye
And leaves whirl wild with jubilee
Through the mad organist's rambling brain;
In the disordered sepulcher
A lady's dead eyes strive to stir,
She dares to laugh, but all in vain;
Three-fingered hands paint a far frieze
With the black blood of vanquished devils,
Who sway and slay the music-breeze
In their daft and dying revels.

Now ebon fluids 'gin to flow
And drip with waxen candle-men;
Black disks of stone are trundling low;
From the organ's bosom fuming slow,
Fouler and sadder perfumes blow
To drown the bourns of demon ken;
Skulls flown from swarthy corpses kiss
And feed upon the organist's soul,
Which ne'er doth cease to toll and roll
Bell-like within this dusk abyss;
Fell plants and flowers writhe in wombs
Of blighted worlds remote from morn,
And musty myrrh exhales from tombs
Whirling in utmost stars forlorn.

Swart suns on sounding waters swell
The turgid notes to direr din,
And murky spirits soar from hell
To flap their cerements palpable
In the wild player's face, and tell
Jet jewels into his mouth, and spin
Mad gossamers amid his hair;
Swift raven locks entwine his throat,
His eyes no longer glare and gloat;
As from a tower high in air,
The console wakes a weirder fear;
His flaming, fitful fingers chill;
One tear he weeps, a dead man's tear:
The sable revery is still.

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof

By ARLTON EADIE



"One look was enough. I snapped off my flashlight and fled."

A startling weird mystery story, of strange deaths on the desolate Moor of Exham, and the mysterious creature known as "The Terror of the Moor"

The Story Thus Far

WHILE on a tramping vacation on Exmoor, Hugh Trenchard discovers an old recluse, Silas Marle, lying unconscious after having been attacked by a mysterious thing which, though speaking with a human voice, leaves behind it a trail of footprints shaped like a cloven hoof.

Seeking help at the nearest house, a private hospital, Hugh meets Professor Felger, the proprietor, a sinister figure whose features are hidden beneath a surgeon's gauze mask. The professor tries to prevent Hugh phoning the police, but he gets the message through by a stratagem, afterward making his escape.

Ronnie Brewster, a former fellow-stu-

dent of Hugh's, is called in to attend to Silas Marle's injuries, and one night Ronnie and Hugh are astonished by the arrival of a strange girl, Joan Endean, apparently half dead with cold and exhaustion. She recovers with suspicious suddenness the moment she is alone with Hugh, and to his unbounded amazement informs him that she has just made her escape from Professor Felger's institution, which is really a private mental hospital. So convinced is Hugh of her sanity that when Dawker arrives to take her back, he resolutely refuses to give her up.

The police have been notified, however, and when Sergeant Jopling arrives he finds that Joan has gone, but lying on the bed is the body of Silas Marle, stabbed to the heart with a dagger whose hilt is shaped like a cloven hoof. Later that night the body is found to be missing, and the only clue to its disappearance is a trail of cloven hoofs beneath the bedroom window.

Andrew Shale, Marle's lawyer, requests an interview with Hugh, and informs him that Marle has signed a letter of attorney, giving Hugh the benefit of his fortune, conditional on his giving a solemn undertaking to use his utmost endeavor to destroy the supernatural monster which is referred to as "The Terror of the Moor."

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THERE was a long pause after the lawyer had made his startling announcement. He carefully folded the document, laid it on the pile by his side, then once more leant forward on his desk, his chin resting on his interlocked fingers, his shrewd eyes fixed on the young man's face.

Hugh Trenchard, on his part, found himself utterly at a loss for words. The

● This is the third installment of a fascinating book-length serial story by Arlton Eadie, a British master of weird fiction, whose skill in building up eery plots and gripping suspense is rapidly winning him a well-deserved fame and making new friends for his stories. If you have not yet read the preceding installments of this thrilling weird mystery novel, then you should begin reading it with this issue, for otherwise you will be missing a real treat. For your convenience we preface this installment of "The Trail of the Cloven Hoof" with a synopsis of the chapters which have gone before.

news of the unexpected legacy—for legacy it was, in spite of the lawyer's respect for legal nicety of expression—followed so swiftly by the fantastic, knight-errant task on which it was conditional, filled him with an amazement too deep to be expressed by the usual commonplaces of speech. His mind groped in vain for a rational explanation. Was it the mere desire for revenge that had induced Silas Marle to offer his fortune as a reward for the destruction of the mysterious thing that had caused his death? Or was there another, a deeper motive?

"Well, Doctor Trenchard," the voice of the lawyer snapped his train of thought. "I suppose you would like a little time in which to think over things, before coming to a decision?"

"It certainly seems to call for a little serious thought," Hugh answered with a smile.

The smile was reflected on Shale's features as he shrugged his shoulders.

"I should imagine that the answer to that depends on your own belief in matters supernatural. If you are convinced

that this so-called 'Terror of the Moor' exists only in the imagination of my client, you may be inclined to settle the matter by accepting right now. It would not be a very dangerous or difficult task to rid the earth of a thing which is non-existent."

"That's very true, Mr. Shale. But I fear the matter is not to be so easily disposed of. In my own mind I am quite certain that the moor is haunted by a—well, for the want of a more definite name, let us call it a monster, which, though not necessarily supernatural in the general meaning of the word, is certainly unknown to science. I had already made up my mind to get to the bottom of the mystery, and intended to take lodgings in the nearest village so as to be as near the scene as possible. But that will not be necessary now, as you inform me that Moor Lodge is my property. Would there be any objection to my taking up my residence there immediately?"

Andrew Shale shook his head.

"Your claim to the estate is incontestable, the more so in view of the fact that Mr. Marle has no living relatives. The legal formalities may take a day or two, but I will hand you the keys of the house now, if you wish to take possession immediately. I think you may rest assured that no one will dispute your presence there"—Mr. Shale paused and a slow smile twisted his parchment-like features—"unless it be the fabled 'Terror of the Moor'!"

A few minutes later the interview terminated, and Hugh hurried back to tell his friend of the new and unexpected development that had taken place.

RONNIE was profuse in his congratulations.

"Well, if you're not the luckiest lad ever!" he exclaimed. "You can't even get lost in a fog without barging up against a millionaire with a fortune to give away!"

"What makes you think that Silas Marle was a millionaire?"

Ronnie laughed gayly.

"I know because I've been using the highly specialized gray matter which I carry beneath my hat. My mode of deduction would do credit to the superest super-sleuth that ever sleuthed. Listen, and I will expound: I have sufficient knowledge of the habits of my fellow-bipeds to know that when a man wears a suit as old and as shabby as that of Silas Marle's, he's either very rich or very poor. Silas Marle could not have been poor, or he could not have bequeathed you anything. Therefore he was a very rich man. A millionaire is a very rich man, therefore Silas Marle was a millionaire. Q. E. D., as my friend Euclid used to say."

"I only hope you're right," said Hugh, laughing. "But you seem to forget that I shall have to do something for the money."

"Slay one full-sized dragon," nodded Ronnie. "Saint George up to date! What a pity Miss Endean has disappeared—she could have fitted in with the general scheme of things by taking the rôle of the Enchanting Princess! But you are surely not taking that Terror stuff seriously, are you?"

Hugh drew meditatively at his pipe.

"Upon my word, old chap, I hardly know whether I do or not," he said presently, a look of indecision on his tanned face. "Sometimes the whole affair seems so fantastic that it would be a positive relief if I could think it was all a nightmare. But I can't, and that's the trouble."

"But hang it all! this is the Twentieth Century—not the Dark Ages!" expostulated his friend. "What data have you got? A few footprints made by a cloven

hoof—footprints which the Harborer of the Staghounds, a man who has grown gray on these moors, declares to have been the slot of an old stag."

Hugh Trenchard shook his head.

"I would only be too glad to accept that explanation if I could, Ronnie. But I know well enough that it was no stag that I encountered the night Marie was attacked."

"Then what on earth was it?"

"That's what I'm going to find out—and before long, too." Hugh started to his feet and began to pace the room restlessly. His lean jaws were tightly clenched and there was a light of battle in his eyes. "There *must* be some explanation—a natural and logical explanation that will fit the facts as we know them. The trouble is that I've grasped the tangled skein haphazard, and every attempt to straighten out the snarl only makes the confusion worse. Once the end of a thread is in my hands, the whole tangle may straighten out with one pull——"

"You remind me of my old granny soliloquizing over her knitting!" Ronnie interrupted flippantly. "What do you say to getting the car out and having a look at your new home? You may pick up a few clues, you know," he added with a grin.

HUGH needed no second invitation. Ten minutes later he was seated in Ronnie's small but powerful car, being piloted through the winding lanes which led to the great uplands of the Moor. Each was busy with his own thoughts, and it was not until half the distance had been covered that Ronnie broke the silence.

"So you have really decided to take up your residence at Moor Lodge?"

Hugh glanced round in some surprize.

"Of course. What better center could I have for my investigations?"

"Ho, ho!—investigations?" His friend chuckled as he repeated the word with exaggerated dramatic emphasis. "That seems as if you're going into the detective business in real earnest. But surely you can't be thinking of living at that all-forsaken place like Robinson Crusoe on his island?"

"Well, I had thought of asking you to act as my Man Friday for a bit, but it's not fair to make you neglect your practise."

Ronnie Brewster gave a somewhat rueful laugh.

"Up to the present my practise is still in the nebulous stage of development," he confessed. "If Moor Lodge were connected with the town by phone I would almost as easily make my calls from there. But it wouldn't be worth while to run a line out here——"

"Why not install a couple of wireless sets?" Hugh made the suggestion half in jest, but to his surprize Ronnie jumped at the idea.

"The very thing!" he exclaimed. "It ought not to be difficult to get a transmitting license, and then we could be in touch with each other even when I was not stopping at your place. And it would be very handy to be able to send out an S. O. S. if you happened to wake up in the night and find a gentleman with a cloven foot leaning over the bed-rail, asking you if it is to be roast or boiled."

Ronnie was on his favorite subject now, and he kept on in the same vein of half-cynical banter until they came in sight of the red-tiled gables and quaint, twisted chimneys of Moor Lodge softly outlined against the grayish-purple sweep of the distant hills.

"Creepy-looking shack, isn't it?" was his final comment as they alighted. "If

there isn't a genuine, blown-in-the-glass, dyed-in-the-wool family spook on the premises—well, all I can say is that the builder ought to be prosecuted for obtaining shudders under false pretenses."

"Obtaining shutters?" Hugh repeated, in a tone which showed his thoughts had been wandering from the other's light-hearted chatter.

"Wake up!" cried the indignant Ronnie. "Who said anything about shutters? I was talking about *shudders*—s-h-u-d-d-e-r-s—two 'd's,' and the 'h' is silent, as in 'pudding.' "

"I get you," laughed his friend. "What a lad you are for a joke, Ronnie! You really must take up your quarters here—the murmur of your baby prattle will be like a ray of sunshine in this gloomy old house."

"Anything to oblige, old bean," Ronnie smirked with the air of one acknowledging a well-deserved compliment. But the next moment his grin vanished as he laid his hand on the other man's shoulder. "But, seriously, Hugh, I hope you don't mind my silly nonsense," he went on in an altered voice. "You see, I have to be so preternaturally wise and solemn when I've got my bedside manner on, that it's quite a relief to blow the cork out now and again."

"Come and stay with me," invited Hugh Trenchard, "and you never need put the cork in at all."

Ronnie gave a laugh and smacked his lips with mock gusto.

"That sounds alluringly festive. I'll think it over."

HUGH had not been jesting when he had described the house as a "gloomy old place," for it looked almost as eery in the bright sunshine as it had looked in the mist-dimmed moonlight when he had first seen it. It was a structure of tolerable antiquity, and had probably been built as a lodge for one of the Yeoman Rangers when Exmoor was one of the royal preserves. One had not to look very closely to detect the marks imprinted by the passing years. The tiles of the high-pitched roof were toned to a deep, mellow red; the oaken beams of the half-timbered walls were weathered to a grayish drab; the intersecting plaster was in places stained a sickly green by the drippings from the eaves, and its whole surface starred and cracked until it resembled the face of a wrinkled hag. There are some houses upon which the hand of Time seems to have been laid with benign touch — gray havens of peace and quietude, or stout old manor-houses whose wide hearths remind one of the crackling of Yule logs; whose cheerful, panelled walls still seem to retain a kindly echo of the songs and laughter of top-booted, red-faced squires; oak-roofed halls which still seem to ring with the merry strains of Sir Roger de Coverly; painted and gilded salons where one seems to catch the measured rhythm of viols and harpsichord, and the light tapping of red-heeled shoes in the stately minuet.

But there are others whose dusty chambers are shadowy, aloof, and mysterious —fit settings for whispered plots, cloaked and masked figures flitting like sinister shadows, or stealthy deeds which shunned the light of day. And of such was the house of which Hugh Trenchard had come to take possession.

The footsteps of Hugh and his companion echoed eerily as they passed along the passage on the ground floor, entering each room in turn and throwing back the curtains which shrouded the windows. Passing through the darkest part of the passage, Hugh's left-hand sleeve caught in something which projected from the

wall. He drew his hand over the surface of the panelling and uttered an exclamation as he felt an unmistakable door-knob.

"Hullo! I never noticed a door here before. I wonder where it leads to?"

"If it leads to the wine-cellar I'll give an unsolicited testimonial to your detective abilities right now!" laughed Ronnie. "Come on, let's see what sort of a tap the old boy kept."

"It's locked," said Hugh, tugging in vain at the handle.

"Try some of the keys that Shale gave you," suggested his friend. "If they fail we'll have to try a little gentle persuasion with the kitchen poker."

But there was no need for the burglarious proposals to be put into operation, for the lock clicked smoothly back when Hugh inserted the third key on the bunch.

"Ah-ha! the mystery deepens!" Ronnie exclaimed dramatically, as he peered through the open doorway. "Who would expect to find an up-to-date chemical laboratory in the wilds of Exmoor?"

Hugh nodded in silent agreement. The room in which they found themselves could have been used for no other purpose. The whole of one wall was covered with glass-fronted cupboards, and inside could be seen row upon row of jars, bottles and phials. Standing against another wall was a long, breast-high bench bearing an orderly array of retorts, test-tubes, scales and recording-instruments. A powerful electric battery stood in one corner, flanked, in the opposite angle of the room, by a large and very modern-looking safe. A roll-top desk and a filing-cabinet occupied the center of the room, and toward these Ronnie gave an expressive nod.

"There ought to be plenty of data for your investigations here," he observed with a smile. "There seem to be enough papers and memoranda to clear up a thousand mysteries. And the desk is not even locked—or the cabinet, either. See here!"

He thrust back the cover of the desk and began to rummage among the papers, only to give vent to a grunt of disappointment.

"Nothing that is likely to help us here," he declared. "Bills, invoices for chemicals and apparatus supplied—the old boy seems to have been a whale for experimental chemistry. Stop a moment, though!" he added suddenly as he opened the lowest drawer. "Here's something that may shed a little light on our darkness. Just run your eagle eye over these——"

Glancing at the official-looking documents which Ronnie spread on the desk, Hugh saw that one was a printed form bearing the royal arms at its head. It was an official certificate of discharge, and the words which had been filled in by hand intimated that MARLE, *Silas James, had been employed in the* INVESTIGATION BRANCH *of* THE RESEARCH LABORATORIES *of the* ROYAL ARSENAL, WOOLWICH, *from April the 23rd, 1915, to October the 11th, 1918, being discharged therefrom at his own request.* Another was a well-worn pass, enclosed in a leather case, authorizing the same MARLE, *Silas James,* to enter the area of the "Danger Buildings" at the royal arsenal.

"Evidently our friend was a retired expert in explosives," Ronnie remarked. "I don't think there's much to be gathered from these papers beyond that not very interesting fact."

Trenchard did not answer immediately. He was staring at the blue-gray papers, his mind working rapidly. At length he turned to Brewster with an unexpected question.

"Does the date, April the 23rd, 1915, suggest anything to you?"

The other man thought for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Of course the War was on at that time—that accounts for Marle being employed in manufacturing, or inventing, explosives——"

"But he need not have had anything to do with explosives at all," Hugh broke in excitedly. "It was on April the 23rd that the first German attack was made in which they used asphyxiating gas! Silas Marle may have been employed in evolving retaliatory counter-measures."

Ronnie Brewster received his chum's suggestion with a careless shrug.

"Interesting, but scarcely informative," was his comment. "I flatter myself I'm not particularly slow in the uptake, but I'm hanged if I can see any connection between a retired government chemist and that precious cloven-hoofed Terror of yours. Why not see what is in the safe?"

Hugh nodded and, selecting the likeliest-looking key on the ring, inserted it in the brass-rimmed keyhole. It fitted—it turned—the ponderous bolts slid back. Grasping the handle, Hugh gave it a half-turn and the heavy door swung open, and as it did so, a loud gasp of amazement escaped his lips.

Until that moment he had scarcely paused to consider what a safe of these dimensions might contain; for all he knew he might be confronted with the dead body of Marle in a repulsive state of decomposition. But the object which met his gaze was less gruesome, though not less surprizing.

The sole content of the safe was a long, bulky, sealed packet, in every respect the counterpart of the one given to him by Joan Endean!

14

A LOOK of the blankest mystification spread over Hugh's features as his eyes fell on the duplicate sealed packet. For it was an exact duplicate, not only in its general size and bulk, but down to such details as the peculiar texture of the paper and the heraldic device which adorned the large red seal. Such a likeness could not possibly be accidental. Either the packet lying before him was the same one that had been stolen from him in the Valley of Rocks, or else this was the genuine packet which the decoy one—containing nothing but blank papers—had been intended to safeguard. In any case, the presence of the latter in Marle's safe formed a strange and unexpected link between him and the mysterious Joan Endean.

"What's wrong, old man?" Ronnie's voice, tinged with a note of amused surprize, brought Hugh's speculations to an abrupt end. "You've been staring at that letter as though you were expecting to see it vanish in a whiff of brimstone. I believe the greedy beggar is disappointed because the safe wasn't packed tight with wads of bank-notes!"

"Scarcely that." Hugh forced a smile as he shook his head. "But that letter happens to be a perfect facsimile of"—he paused, suddenly calling to mind Joan's stipulation of secrecy; adding, a trifle lamely—"of—of another letter that I have seen."

"Nothing wonderful in that," was the other's careless rejoinder. "Most letters have a family likeness on the outside—it's what is inside them that makes all the difference between a tender missive of love and a curt intimation that a check by return mail will oblige."

Trenchard picked up the letter and balanced it thoughtfully in his hand as he read the superscription:

To Hugh Trenchard, M. D.

Beneath, apparently written by the same hand, though in weak and shaky characters, was the injunction: *Only to be opened in the event of the Death or Disappearance of Mr. Silas Marle.*

"Pardon my idle curiosity," said Ronnie, trying to speak indifferently in spite of his impatience at his friend's tardiness. "Aren't you going to open the thing?"

Hugh again weighed the letter in his hand; then he shook his head.

"Not here, old chap. Judging by the weight, this is a somewhat lengthy communication. I think it would be more cheerful and comfortable to read it before a nice bright fire. Besides" — Hugh pointed to the single window of the laboratory, already dimming in the early dusk—"probably it will be dark in here before I've finished, and—unless I'm very much mistaken—the contents of this packet will not sound any the better for being read in the gloaming."

RETURNING to the library, they lighted the lamp, drew the curtains and set a match to the fire which was ready laid in the grate. Then and then only did Hugh break the seal, draw forth several closely written sheets of foolscap, and commence to read:

"Dear Doctor:—

"When you read these lines I shall be dead (or I shall have disappeared, which practically amounts to the same thing) and you may regard what I have to state as a revelation coming from the grave. Considering the very short time I have known you, it will undoubtedly come as a surprize to you that I should single you out as my confidant. But you may believe me when I say that I have not reposed this trust in you because my time is short and I have little choice in the matter. I flatter myself that I am a keen and accurate judge of character, and I know that your acceptance of the strange task which I have imposed on you will not be actuated by the mere sordid desire to possess my money. Moreover, I have travelled in the East long enough to have my mentality tinged and more than tinged, with the fatalism of the Orient. I do not believe that it was mere blind chance that led your footsteps through the mist, guiding you to me in my hour of need, sending in you a champion, young, clear-thinking, with sound nerves and a healthy body. Surely it was Fate—maybe a Power even higher—that ordained the appearance, at the very moment I was stricken down, of the very man whom I should have chosen out of all the world as the one best fitted to carry on the work I had begun. That the work is not free from danger, my own fate will be sufficient proof; whether the end justifies the risk you must judge for yourself. But this much I will say here—no mail-clad Crusader knight ever rode forth on a holier or more righteous cause than the one you will follow in ridding the earth of the Terror of the Moor.

"It would be both tedious and unnecessary to give even a brief account of my eventful life; suffice to say that the outbreak of war in 1914 found me a lecturer on chemistry at a university in the North of England. I soon found my post a sinecure, however, for the whole of the students joined the army in a body one afternoon, and I was left facing rows of empty benches. I myself was too old for military service; so I transferred my activities to a munition factory that had been newly opened in the neighborhood, and for the next six months or so I was employed in the simple routine work of checking the purity of the various chemicals used in the manufacture of explosives. The work, though of course re-

sponsible and fairly dangerous, was not hard in itself, and I frequently found myself compelled to wait for hours in the great, well-equipped laboratory with nothing whatever to do.

"It was during these periods that I began to make a few experiments on my own account, and as a result I was able to suggest some minor improvements both in the mode of handling and the actual proportions of the ingredients used. But beyond a mere formal acknowledgment of my communications, the War Office took no notice, and I quite thought that my letters were reposing in some dusty pigeon-hole, when, on the twenty-third of April, 1915, I received an urgent and imperative order to proceed to London.

"Upon my arrival at King's Cross Station I was met by an eminent statesman, a man whose features the cartoonist and camera-man have made familiar to every inhabitant of the Kingdom.

" 'Professor Marle, I presume?' he said, coming forward with outstretched hand.

"In the shock of surprize I blurted out his name, but he immediately shook his head in smiling remonstrance.

" 'I fear I can not lay claim to such a famous name'—even at the time I noted the ambiguous nature of his disclaimer—'A moment's reflection should convince you that you have been misled by a chance resemblance.' He spoke coolly, but the twinkle in his eye told me that I was not intended to take his word too literally. 'As a matter of fact, you must consider me as belonging to the good old Welsh family of "Jones." '

" 'An extensive clan,' I said, falling in with his humor. 'And what might your business be with me, Mr. Jones?'

" 'Important, but in no way official. I hope you understand that perfectly.' He repeated the words slowly and emphatically, *'in no way official.* You must make up your mind to regard me as merely being a certain Mr. Jones, a private and undistinguished Englishman who has the welfare of his country at heart. Is that quite clear?'

" 'Quite.'

" 'Then be pleased to follow me.'

"A big limousine was waiting a few yards away, the door held open by a liveried footman whose stature quite dwarfed my companion. As we emerged into the station courtyard, two other cars started into motion, taking up their position one ahead and one behind the car we were in, and my wonder grew as I noted the burly forms and watchful eyes of their occupants. 'Mr. Jones' might modestly proclaim himself an ordinary private citizen, but it was evident that he had the resources of Scotland Yard at his beck and call.

"The three cars turned west, zigzagging through the mean streets which lie between King's Cross and New Oxford Street, and as we headed south I made sure that we were bound for Downing Street. But we skirted the north side of Trafalgar Square, swinging down the darkened Mall, leaving Buckingham Palace on our right. There was a traffic block opposite Victoria Station, but a brief, silent signal from the leading car cleared a way as if by magic, and a few minutes later we were heading down the King's Road at racing speed. I caught a glimpse of the river as we passed over Putney Bridge, but lost my bearings completely in the dimly lighted suburban roads beyond. When at last we pulled up before a large country mansion, I knew that I must be somewhere in the neighborhood of Richmond, but that was all.

"THE door swung open as we ascended the front steps, and I was ushered into a cheerful dining-room where a meal lay already spread. Mr. Jones was a brilliant talker, and throughout the meal he kept up a flow of interesting conversation, without, however, once hinting at the nature of the business which he had brought me there to discuss. It was only when we had adjourned to the smoking-room, with one detective patrolling the gravel walk in front of the windows and another keeping watch in the passage outside the door, that he placed his hand in his pocket and produced a small sheet of paper.

" 'Did you write that?' he asked in a conversational tone.

"I nodded, wondering what was coming next. For the thing was merely one of the letters that I had sent to the Ministry of Munitions, suggesting a quite minor and unimportant modification of the formula of one of the stock explosives. But before I could frame the question that was in my mind, he turned the sheet over and pointed to some chemical symbols scribbled in pencil on the back.

" 'And this too, I presume?' he went on, watching me keenly the while.

"I took the paper in my hand and read: $C^4H^7N^3O^2$. $C^6H^{12}O^6$. $C^{216}H^{318}N^{54}S^5O^{68}$. $C^{12}H^{14}O^4(NO^3)^6$. $C^3H^5(NO^3)^3$. There was a sixth combination of symbols, but this I must not divulge, even to you; so, for the purpose of this narrative, I will refer to it simply as the 'X Formula.'

"In a flash I realized what had happened. I must have been jotting down some notes respecting my experiments, and I had inadvertently used the same sheet of paper on which to write my letter to the ministry.

" 'Yes,' I was forced to admit, 'that is my handwriting. But I certainly had no idea that there was anything on the back of that sheet when I sent that letter to you.'

" 'I can well believe that!' Mr. Jones smiled somewhat grimly. 'It's extremely fortunate that the communication did not fall into other hands. However, I have not brought you here to call you over the coals for being so careless. It is rather to ask you for a friendly explanation of what was in your mind when you made those notes.'

" 'You know the meaning of the formulæ?'

"Mr. Jones nodded his gray head. 'Naturally, in these days, when every newspaper is full of the spy peril, we should not allow a set of mysterious-looking letters and figures to pass through our hands without wanting to know the meaning of it. Within an hour of its receipt, that letter was in the hands of a government analyst. But his report only seemed to deepen the mystery. He states that the first three formulæ respectively represent creatine, inosite, and albumen —three organic substances which are to be found in every human body; while the last three combinations of symbols represent gun-cotton, nitro-glycerin, and the newly invented devastite — three of the most powerful explosives known to science.'

" '*Yet the same chemical elements occur in each!*' I said slowly. 'Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen—combined in certain proportions they form substances, not only innocuous in themselves, but substances that are absolutely vital to the human organism. Combine the same elements in different proportions, *and you have the deadliest explosives!*'

" 'My God!—you mean to say——'

" '*That every human being is a potential living bomb!*'

"The effect of my words was electrical.

The man who would have faced a hostile House without a tremor now sank into his chair, deathly white and unnerved. It did not need more explanation to enable his keen, far-seeing brain to visualize the awful possibilities of my discovery. Yet I could see that he was struggling to disbelieve me.

" 'It—it's incredible!' he gasped at last. 'Why, if what you say is true——'

" 'Why waste words? Words may sway the thoughts and actions of men, but the most transcendent eloquence is powerless to affect the elements of nature. Compare those sets of symbols, and tell me honestly if you—without the assistance of a chemical expert—could say offhand which represents, say, creatine, the crystalline substance which is contained in your own muscles at this present moment, and the high explosive which goes by the name of devastite. Consider again that the very air we breathe consists of four-fifths of nitrogen—and it is scarcely necessary to remind a man occupying your post that nitrogen forms the basic principle of almost every explosive known. Then ask yourself whether it is beyond the power of modern science to make practical use of those facts. I know that you will probably remind me, in your turn, that the use of that particular explosive, devastite, has been discontinued because it has been found liable to detonate spontaneously through decomposition. But my answer is, that such a defect is a defect only so long as the explosive is within our lines—the moment it is within the *enemy* lines, the more easily it explodes the better! Each soldier in the vast armies arrayed against us contains within himself the means of his own destruction. It but needs one single element, harmless in itself, to be incorporated in a gas and sent over the enemy trenches, and the next few hours would see a holocaust such as the world has never known.'

"For a long time my companion looked at me without speaking. 'So *that* was your idea?'

"I felt myself flush at his tone. 'It certainly *was* my idea, but I abandoned it.'

" 'Why?' he asked quickly.

" 'It was too horrible, too fiendish, too frightful——'

" 'Frightful?' He pounced on the word like a swooping hawk. 'Do you know *who* has taught us that word? *Who* has advocated the doctrine of ruthless frightfulness, backing it up with specious arguments that the most terrible weapons are the most merciful because they make the struggle of opposing nations shorter? Our foes have taught us that—and now they shall be confounded by their own text—"hoist with their own petard" in real earnest! Put whatever price you please on your own services—we must have that gas! I hope, I pray that we may never need to employ it, but we must have it—or the knowledge of its preparation—to use as a last resort.'

"I will not weary you with a recapitulation of the arguments he employed before I consented to renew my researches. But I made one stipulation. The secret of the gas must remain in my own possession, contained in a sealed envelope that would only be handed to him when I was convinced that no other alternative remained than the complete destruction of the British Empire. But fortunately I was not called upon to make that momentous decision, for when the United States of America became our allies there was very little doubt as to the ultimate result of the war.

"The peril has passed—but has it passed for all time? If I could have answered that question with an unhesitant

affirmative, I would have committed the secret to the flames. But ever at the back of my mind there lurked a fear that the world might be confronted with another, even graver, crisis, when the possession of my secret would be the deciding factor between victory and defeat. For you may rest assured that whoever holds the sealed packet, which I hereby give into your hands, holds in his hands the destiny of mankind. Guard it, I entreat you, as a sacred trust; as something even dearer than life. For, once it falls into the hands of the emissaries of a nation whose ambition is the domination of the world, carnage and hideous chaos will follow as surely as the night follows day, and——"

A harsh command cut through Trenchard's voice like the stroke of an ax:

"Up with your hands—both of you!"

Three shadowy figures, each holding a levelled revolver, stood in the doorway.

15

THE grim command, backed as it was by muzzles of three weapons trained with such deadly accuracy as to make them appear like so many circles of steel, left no alternative but to obey. Hugh and Ronnie raised their hands above their heads.

"Keep 'em there, and don't move except as I tell you," said the man who had spoken before; to his companions he added, but without turning his head: "Keep the red-headed chap covered, Dawson; I'll see that the other one behaves himself. Regan, give 'em a frisk."

One of the men stepped forward and ran his hands lightly over Hugh's clothing. In a very few seconds he had found and removed the revolver which Hugh had carried in his hip pocket ever since the death of Silas Marle.

"Well heeled, eh?" The spokesman of the party took up the weapon with his disengaged hand and glanced at the conical bullets which nestled in the chambers of the cylinder. "See what sort of artillery the red-headed chap's got in the back of his pants——"

"Look here, old sport," remonstrated Ronnie, "not so much of the 'red-headed chap.' I know I'm not exactly a brunette, but——"

"Shut up! You'll have plenty of time to squawk when——" The rest of his remark was drowned in Ronnie's sudden cackle of laughter as the searcher inserted his fingers beneath his armpits. "What's the game now? Getting hysterical?"

"No—ticklish. I never could bear any one to touch me there. If you do not desist, I shall give one long scream and bite your face. I will—if it poisons me!"

"Stow your jaw," ordered the searcher roughly. "Where do you pack your gat?"

Ronnie looked pained.

"Gat? What vulgarity of terminology! We always refer to it as a 'lethal weapon' in *our* set. Well, if you're going to probe my anatomy until you find one, you'll wear your fingers into fists before you get the gat I haven't got. If you manage to find anything on me more deadly than a fountain-pen I'll present you with a fiver for your trouble."

The searcher paused and glanced round at the man who appeared to be the leader of the party.

"You heard that, sir?" he asked in a tone of virtuous triumph. "I call on you to witness that he offered me a bribe in the execution of my duty."

"Your duty?" gasped Hugh, a light beginning to dawn on him. "You don't mean to tell me that you are policemen?"

"By no means," was the answer, given somewhat stiffly. "We are detectives belonging to the Special Investigation Branch of Scotland Yard. I am Detective-Inspector Renshaw, and it is my duty

to take you into custody for being on enclosed premises at night for a supposed unlawful purpose. And it is my duty to warn you that anything you may say may be taken down and——"

"Oh, my sacred aunt!" wailed Ronnie, suddenly collapsing in the nearest chair and hiding his face in his hands.

"——used in evidence." The inspector produced a note-book. "I'll trouble you for your names and the last addresses at which you slept."

Ronnie's shoulders ceased shaking as he rose to his feet.

"Put down the red-headed chap as Auburn Harry, of Wapping," he said gravely. "You know—the man who strangled five policemen with his bare hands. My accomplice in crime—'pal' is the correct term, I believe—is Cross-eyed Dick, of Shadwell——"

"Shut up, you ass!" Hugh interrupted; then he turned to the detectives. "I'm afraid there have been mistakes on both sides, inspector. You apparently took us for a couple of crooks, and your dramatic entry certainly made us think you were three gentlemen of the same kidney. As a matter of fact, I am Doctor Trenchard, the present owner of this house, and this is my friend, Doctor Brewster."

Inspector Renshaw looked at him half incredulously. "I suppose you have some proof of what you say?" he asked at length.

"Not here, I'm afraid. But Mr. Andrew Shale, Marle's solicitor, will vouch for me, as will also Sergeant Jopling of the local police."

THE inspector did not verbally intimate that the explanation was satisfactory, but his action was eloquent. He handed the revolver back to Hugh.

"Hope we didn't scare you with our gun-play, sir."

Hugh laughed.

"Oh, I'm getting used to scares since coming down here for a quiet holiday."

"The rest cure hasn't been a success, eh?" Inspector Renshaw nodded in a manner that was intended to convey sympathy. "We've heard all about the funny business that has been going on here, and for the past few days the place has been under observation. When my man reported that he'd seen two men enter, I rushed over at once, and thought I'd got a capture."

"You must have hustled," Ronnie put in, speaking in a tone of admiring respect. "Unless you were camping somewhere on the Moor, you must have started soon after we entered this house. I am rather curious to know how your man managed to tip you off so promptly."

The inspector shrugged and permitted himself a cryptic smile.

"Oh, we have our methods, sir," he said with an air of mystery. "Some people are very fond of sneering at us and hinting that the mental development of the C. I. D. got atrophied somewhere in the Mid-Victorian era. They are apt to remember our failures and forget the fact that Scotland Yard delivers the goods—in the shape of the wanted man—nine times out of ten. We don't advertise every new invention we adopt, but I can tell you this—at one hour's notice I could get enough men here to search every square yard of this Moor, big as it is."

"That's the stuff to give 'em!" cried Ronnie approvingly. "I bet you've got a wireless set, and a few airplanes, and half-a-dozen tanks up your sleeve somewhere! I thought I and my friend were going to enjoy a nice little spook-hunt all on our own, but now you've come in, all we'll have to do is sit tight and read all about it in the papers. Of course you have a theory?"

Inspector Renshaw gave a non-committal shrug.

"I don't set much store on theories when I can get hold of solid facts. You seem to have got hold of a few," he made a gesture toward the sheets of manuscript on the table. "I suppose you have been going through the dead man's papers?"

"As he had a perfect right to do," Ronnie interposed briskly, "seeing that the whole of Silas Marle's property devolves on him——"

"Of course, of course," Inspector Renshaw hastened to say. "My remark was not intended as a criticism of your action, Doctor Trenchard. I was merely anxious to know if you have found anything that will shed light on the mysterious happenings here."

"Well, not directly," Hugh answered, after a pause during which he did some hard thinking. "The only salient facts contained in the papers I have already read are that Marle was a chemist who had made a special study of the chemical warfare which the late War brought into being, and had invented a novel and—at any rate theoretically—effective method of wholesale slaughter. You are quite welcome to hear the remainder of his narrative, but I warn you I shall skip any passage which appears to be of a private or personal nature."

"That's fair enough," assented Renshaw. To his subordinates he added: "You two keep watch outside and see that we are not disturbed."

WHEN they had the room to themselves, Hugh took up the thread of Silas Marle's story:

"My conditions were accepted without the slightest demur. I was to be given an absolutely free hand in making my researches, but, merely as a matter of form, I was entered on the pay-roll of the laboratory staff of the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich. But it was very seldom that I entered the gates of that establishment, for I quickly realized that my work was too hazardous to be carried on in the same vicinity where large quantities of explosives were being manufactured and stored. I looked out for a spot, lonely and remote from human habitations, and at last I decided to buy a dilapidated and reputedly ghost-haunted house known as Moor Lodge, situated on the most desolate part of Exmoor.

"Needless to say, I did not go out of my way to refute the grisly legends respecting the old house, for I counted on them ensuring me the seclusion I so much desired. One of the rooms I fitted up as a laboratory, and there I labored to convert my dream into a tangible, practicable reality.

"No galley-slave ever toiled harder at his oar than I toiled at my bench during the first three months. We lived here alone, my dear wife and I, and sometimes whole weeks would go by without either of us seeing a strange face. She knew that I was engaged in confidential work for the government, but little did she guess the nature of that work!

"But gradually the strain began to tell on me. I was far from being a young man, and in addition to my experiments I was obliged to perform the rough work of the house; for my wife was not strong physically, though nothing could have exceeded her love and devotion to me. It was almost impossible to hire a domestic servant at that time, when the prospect of earning high wages was tempting every able-bodied girl to the munition factories; even in normal times I doubt whether any local girl would have consented to spend a single night in a house with such a ghostly reputation as Moor Lodge. I even journeyed to Plymouth and inter-

viewed several discharged soldiers and sailors who had been disabled in the war. But they all seemed too intelligent for my purpose—I simply dared not risk having a man on the premises who might so much as guess at the nature of the work on which I was employed. Things were at a deadlock when Fate brought to my door the very man I needed.

"No doubt you will call to mind how severe the weather was in the winter of '16-'17. It was by far the worst winter in the war. The ponds and wells were frozen solid, and the very earth seemed blighted with the intense cold. Toward evening, on one of the bitterest days, I was working in the laboratory when there came a light, timid tap on the front door. The sound was so unusual in that desolate region that for a moment I attributed it to a fall of half-melted snow from the roof; but presently there came another tap, this time accompanied by a low, half-articulate moan. I caught up the nearest weapon handy—which happened to be a short iron bar which I had been using as a poker for my furnace—and made my way to the door. Outside was a man dressed in a ragged and mud-plastered khaki uniform. The badges and buttons had been roughly torn off, so that the tunic was open, showing the gray shirt beneath. He wore no cap, and his hands and face were blue with the cold.

" 'Hullo!' I said, staring at him.

"He was leaning against the door-post, as though for support, and at the sound of my voice he raised two deeply sunken, lack-luster eyes to mine.

" 'Hullo, matey,' he responded weakly.

" 'What are you doing here?' I demanded. 'You'll catch your death of cold if you go about half dressed in this weather.'

" 'I'm half dead already, matey;' and as though to prove his words, he staggered forward and would have fallen if I had not caught him in time.

"When I put my arms round him I got a shock. The man was nothing but skin and bone, and when I lifted him he weighed no heavier than a large child. He was starved—not 'starved with the cold,' as they say hereabouts, but literally starved with hunger. I got him into the living-room, pulled him round with a stiff glass of brandy, then ransacked the larder and watched him eat. Eat!—I thought he would never stop eating, and as he wolfed the platefuls I took a good look at him.

"His age could not have been more than eighteen or twenty, but he was tall and big-made and when in his usual health he must have been unusually strong. His hair was fair and inclined to be curly, and I judged by its length that some considerable time had elapsed since it had last received the attentions of a military barber. His features were prominent, but not unpleasing—indeed, had it not been for the curious expression in his eyes he might have been considered handsome. I find it difficult to convey that expression in words. It was at once wary, alert, shifting, and restless. But the only way in which I can make my meaning clear is to describe it as an *animal* look—not that which one sees in the eyes of an intelligent dog, or even a cat, or any domesticated animal; rather was it the look of instinctive hostility and distrust which one may see in the eyes of a wild beast, untamed and untamable, as it roams its native wilds. I took but little heed of this strange trait at the time, naturally attributing it to the hardships which he had obviously undergone. Later on I had good reason to recall it to mind.

"When he had cleared his plate for

the third time, I began to put a few questions:

" 'What's your name?'

" 'Jake.'

" 'Jake what?' The length of the pause which followed my question warned me that the answer was likely to be a lie.

" 'Jake Thomas Smith.'

" 'Have you any more names?' I queried sarcastically, and to my surprize he nodded.

" 'The blokes in my platoon call me "Crazy Jake",' he informed me solemnly.

"I looked hard at him, suspecting that I was being paid back in my own coin. But he went on unconcernedly finishing up the remaining scraps of food, cracking the bones with his strong teeth, the canines of which were unusually long and pointed. When he licked up every scrap of gravy off his plate, just like a dog, I began to glimpse something of the truth. He was one of those rare examples of extreme atavism, a throw-back to primitive types, an unlucky being who had been cursed with more than his fair share of the thin streak of animalism which is the compulsory legacy of the human race. Later on, when I had the opportunity of examining him more closely, I found that he was able to exercise those muscles (represented in the normal man as mere rudimentary survivals) which move the ears; his sense of smell was unusually keen; his eyes possessed the power of reflecting the light in exactly the same manner as the eyes of certain species of carnivores. It came as something of a shock to think that such a man had been accepted for military service, but, after all, there was nothing wrong with him in a physical sense. On the contrary, as is so often the case with these reversions, the man was exceptionally strong and active, and his peculiar mental traits might well have passed unnoticed in the perfunctory examination to which recruits were subjected in the latter days of the war.

"By degrees I got his story from him. Of course he was a deserter, though to do him bare justice he seemed quite unconscious of the gravity of his offense—or, indeed, that he had committed any offense at all. He had simply got tired of his surroundings, and the irksome restraints on his liberty, and had wandered off, his instinct drawing him to the great open moors, living on herbs and roots, and scraps that he could find or steal, until the intense cold had beaten him.

" 'And what do you intend to do?' I asked him when he had finished his vague and rambling tale.

"He gave me a vacant stare. 'I dunno,' was the extent of his future plans.

" 'Do you know what they'll do to you if they catch you, Jake?'

" 'Make me slope arms by numbers?' His accompanying grimace was eloquent of his distaste for that form of exercise.

" 'They'll do more than that, my poor lad. They will shoot you.'

" 'Me?' he cried with a sort of simple wonder. 'Shoot me dead?'

" 'Dead as mutton,' I had to tell him.

" 'Why?' he demanded in an aggrieved tone. 'I never hurt 'em—I never hurt a fly.'

" 'That's just the trouble, Jake. You became a soldier in order to hurt people. That's what a soldier is for in time of war—to hurt soldiers wearing another sort of uniform—or to get hurt by them.' I tried to explain the matter as best I could, but after I had finished I very much doubted whether the enormity of his offense had penetrated his intelligence. Not that he was an idiot in the ordinary sense of the word; I classed him as a 'mattoid,' a man whose brain could not be gaged by comparison with ordinary

standards. He might be trained, and taught to perform certain tasks, much in the same manner as an intelligent dog goes through certain tricks. More than that, he might be capable of having certain fixed and elementary ideas instilled into him by simple repetition; for later on I had good reason to know that he possessed an unusually retentive memory. But beyond that, and as far as original and self-conscious thought and reasoning were concerned, his mind was an absolute blank. And as I realized the fact, I knew that here was the very servant I had been praying for—strong, willing, docile, and no more capable of understanding the work on which I was engaged than was a horse or a dog.

"I SAT up late that night, watching Jake sleeping curled up on the floor in front of the fire, debating with myself whether I should turn him over to the military authorities or keep him myself. In the end I decided that he would be serving his country more effectively by doing the menial work of Moor Lodge than by endangering his own life, and the lives of all around him, by handling a loaded rifle and experimenting with Mills's bombs. In the morning I put the matter to him, and he was only too glad to stay with me. He soon picked up the routine of his simple duties, and for a time all went well. My experiments proceeded apace. I succeeded in isolating the missing element and gasefying it in a form that could not be detected when mingled with the ordinary atmosphere. Complete success was within my very grasp when I was brought up short by an unexpected and disquieting discovery.

"You must understand that I had never attempted to keep Jake confined to the house—indeed, I doubt whether he would have obeyed me had I forbidden him to leave it. I had provided him with a suit of clothes such as might be worn by a lad working on a farm, and he was accustomed to spend his hours off duty roaming freely about the Moor. One evening he came home at dusk, after having been absent most of the day, took off his coat, and began to sweep out the laboratory where I was still working. At first I took no notice of him, but presently I began to see that he was not giving much attention to what he was doing. Every now and then he would stop sweeping and furtively take something from his trousers pocket, glance at it, polish it on his sleeve, examine it again, and then transfer it to his pocket and go on sweeping. Secretly amused, I watched his antics for a while out of the corner of my eye, and when he was admiring the thing for the umteenth time, I purposely made a sudden movement. Jake tried to conceal his treasure, but in his hurry to replace it in his pocket the thing slipped out of his hand, falling on the stone floor with a jingle that was unmistakable. It was a brightly polished five-shilling piece.

" 'Hullo, Jake,' I laughed. 'I didn't know you were a moneyed man. Where did you get that from? Have you been robbing a bank or something?' For I knew well enough that he had not had any money when he arrived.

"Instead of saying that he'd found it—which I quite thought he had—he jibbed at my question and stood silent, his hands fumbling with the broom-handle while he shifted his feet uneasily, the very picture of conscious guilt.

" 'Where did you get that money from?' I repeated more sternly. 'Did you steal it?'

"He bridled up at that. 'Jake is not a thief!' he declared, looking me full in the face.

" 'Then where did you get it from?'

" 'Some one give it me,' he said at length.

" 'Who's the some one?'

" 'A man.'

" 'What man?'

" 'The man that lives in the big house.'

"His evident reluctance to answer only increased my suspicions that something was wrong. I kept questioning him until I learnt that 'the big house' was the place which is now known as 'The Torside Private Sanatorium.' Turning this piece of information over in my mind, I handed him back his coin, and as he dropped it into his pocket I heard it jingle against other money.

" 'Ah, have you got many of those pretty bits of silver, Jake?' I asked carelessly, pretending to resume my work as though the matter were of no importance.

"He fell into the trap at once. He was unable to count, but he proudly held up the outstretched fingers of one hand.

" 'Five, eh?' I commented with forced geniality. 'He must be a nice, kind man to give away all that money. Do you think he might give *me* some?'

" 'Not all at once,' Jake explained innocently. 'He only gives me one at a time.'

"Oh-ho! thought I, so he has been at the 'big house' four times before today. The mystery was deepening!

" 'I think I'll have to pay a visit to this kind gentleman who gives money away,' I smiled. 'I've been wanting to meet some one like that all my life.'

" 'You'll have to sing first,' said Jake, eyeing me as though doubtful as to my vocal abilities.

" '*What?*' I cried.

" 'I always have to sing before he gives me anything.'

" 'And what on earth do you sing?' I asked, utterly bewildered.

" 'Songs,' grunted Jake.

" 'Sing one to me,' I said, struck by a sudden idea, 'and I'll give you another five shillings.'

"He needed no further inducement, but immediately put down the broom and struck up one of the very unofficial marching tunes that he'd learnt in camp. But it wasn't the tune that caused the color to drain away from my face and my heart to be filled with a sickening horror —it was the doggerel words which he had adopted in place of the quasi-French of the original. *They were a crude but recognizable parody of the chemical equation which represented the composition of my secret explosive!*

"In a flash I realized what had happened. Underrating the creature's intelligence and forgetting his marvelously retentive memory, I had not troubled to keep my notes out of sight. Somebody had got hold of him and bribed him to learn them off by heart—and who was likely to do such a thing except a secret enemy agent? Cold sweat broke out on my forehead as I saw how narrowly irretrievable disaster had been averted. Once the secret of the gas was in the hands of the enemy, it would be a mere matter of days—perhaps only hours—before their immense and well-equipped system of gas-producing factories would enable them to wipe out the Allied Armies *en masse*. At that time it was known in official circles that the German guns were firing more than fifty per cent of gas and war-chemical shells, besides using their apparatus for cloud attacks and batteries of short-range Liven's projectors. Was it likely they would refuse to use this new and terrible weapon when once it lay ready to their hands?

"Steadying myself with an effort, I turned to the innocent cause of all the trouble:

" 'So that was the song you sang to the

nice gentleman at the big house, eh? Did he seem to think that it was worth the money?'

"Jake shook his head. 'No, he was angry and said I must have learnt it wrong. He said he wanted to hear the *last* song that was in that book,' and he pointed to the large note-book in which I entered the results of my experiments.

"A WAVE of relief swept over me as I realized that the fool had not yet betrayed the secret; yet he must now know the final and ultimate formula, for he had just repeated it to me. But the explanation was not far to seek: he had taken another look at the book and memorized the last formula since he had returned that evening. So far, my secret was safe; but how long would it remain so after Jake had paid another visit to the 'big house'?

"That visit must be prevented at all costs. But how? If he chose to quit the house that minute, I had no power to stop him. How could I ensure the silence of a creature of such mentality unless I silenced him for ever? *For ever!* I felt myself trembling as a thought flashed through my mind as a blinding electric flash traverses a vacuum tube. Within the reach of my arm was a phial containing a liquid preparation of the deadly formula. So far it had never been tried on a living organism, but here — forced on me by circumstances over which I had had no control—was the opportunity to test its efficiency in a practical manner and at the same time ensure the silence of the only man likely to betray it to the enemy.

"Averting my head lest my very expression should betray the sinister project I had in mind, I addressed Jake: 'When have you arranged to see the kind gentleman again?' I asked as carelessly as I could.

" 'Tonight, after supper,' he answered, and with those words he sealed his own fate.

"There could be no turning back now; one man must be sacrificed in order that humanity might be spared a scourge such as has never fallen on it since the world was evolved. What was one single life —and such a life!—compared with the millions of clear-minded, sentient beings who would dissolve in smoke and flame if he were allowed to reach the big house that night? During the hour which elapsed before supper-time I probed my soul as I had never probed it before, weighing the matter, sifting each argument for or against, as meticulously as did any judge before assuming the black cap. I shrunk from my task with horror, but I went through with it to the bitter end.

"Its actual accomplishment was simplicity itself. A few drops of the colorless liquid poured into the mug of cider that he always drank at supper, and the thing was done. It only remained to get him well away from the house without delay.

" 'Your friend will be waiting for you, Jake,' I reminded him.

" 'Aye, so he will.' He rose and took up his cap. 'Good-night, sir.'

" 'Good-bye, Jake,' I answered, adding under my breath, 'and God help you!'

"I allowed him five minutes' start, then hurried on my overcoat and followed. Outside, the night was dark and forbidding, with the sky overcast by a murky veil of cloud which shrouded the face of the moon. Before me stretched the Moor, a waste of empty blackness, devoid of even a film of low-lying mist to denote the winding combes which ran between the rocky tors. As I made my way along the well-defined track I seemed to be walking through an infinity of shadows.

The only sounds which broke the eery stillness were the slight crunching of the gravel beneath my hurrying footsteps and the far-off mournful cries of a flock of wandering sea-gulls.

"When the slope of the ground told me that I had passed the brow of the ridge, I glanced at the illuminated dial of my watch and saw that twenty minutes had elapsed since I had administered the drug to Jake. This told me little, for I had not the slightest idea how long the stuff would take to work. I walked more slowly down the slope, and only quickened my pace to mount the farther side of the combe in order to get a view of the path ahead. Not that I could see anything in that pall of darkness as yet, but I wanted to have an uninterrupted view of what was about to happen. Of course, I had not caught sight of Jake since quitting the house, but I knew that the path I had followed was the only means of his reaching 'the big house.' Somewhere in the darkness ahead he must be hurrying along, his poor brain filled with childish delight at the prospect of soon possessing another big, shining coin; as blissfully unconscious of his impending fate as are the microscopic infusoria before the drop of sterilizing solution wipes them out of existence.

"AT LAST I reached the summit of the high tor from which I knew I could command a view almost to the gates of the house for which Jake was making. I paused and glanced at my watch again. I started when I saw that a full hour had elapsed without anything happening. Had the experiment failed? Was the whole thing nothing but an empty, impracticable dream? Had my days and nights of labor been wasted in a quest as useless and futile as those of the madman who strove to square the circle or evolve a system of perpetual motion? Throwing aside all caution in my desire to know what had happened, I pressed onward almost at a run. Nor did I pause or slacken speed when my onward progress brought into sight a single pinpoint of light, telling me that the inmates of the Sanatorium were awake and stirring.

"Then, slowly but inexorably, the conviction was forced on me that my experiment had failed—that, though theoretically flawless, it had proved useless when subjected to the acid test of practise—and I can truthfully say that my first emotion was a feeling of profound relief.

" 'Thank God, the formula is harmless!' I cried, and laughed aloud in the darkness. 'Let him tell the spy the secret—and much good may it do him! I have failed—but again I thank God and am content. At least, humanity has been spared the menace of——'

"Coming from a spot barely a hundred yards ahead, a flash of blood-red fire stabbed the night, and the fraction of a second later a dull, muffled concussion smote my ears. It was the death-knell of Crazy Jake!—that was my one conscious thought as I stood, stunned by the awful manner in which my theory had been proved. It was some minutes before I could pull myself together.

"Prudence warned me to leave the spot as soon as possible, for it was but a short distance to the spy's house and he could not have failed to hear the explosion. Yet a horrible fascination, an irresistible desire to look upon my fell handiwork, drew me onward as a magnet draws a needle. Almost before I was aware of what I was doing—the danger I was courting in risking being seen near the spot—I found myself running forward, my eyes following the dancing

beam of my flashlight as it searched the ground.

"I will not harrow your feelings by describing the sight which finally met my eyes. Sufficient to say that the explosion had expended its force downward, in precisely the same manner as dynamite does. The whole of the lower portion of his body had been blown to atoms, but the upper part of his chest, his arms and head, were comparatively uninjured. One look was enough—more than enough! I snapped off my flashlight and fled. . . .

"You can well imagine the eagerness with which I scanned the first newspapers I could get hold of. But there was no account in the morning paper of a mutilated body being found, nor in the next morning's, nor the next. As the days lengthened into weeks without a single hint of the tragedy, my relief gave place to wonder, and finally to a vague, nameless fear. Had I not seen the uninjured half of Jake's body lying in the roadway, I should have dismissed the matter with the assumption that it had been completely destroyed by the explosion. But the Moor is not so utterly deserted that such an object could remain unnoticed in the public highway for any length of time. It must have been removed on the same night when the tragedy occurred. But by whom? And for what purpose? But as the months went by without a single hint or rumor of the affair being brought to light I could only come to the conclusion—a fantastic one, maybe, but the only theory that would explain the facts—that the remains had been carried off and devoured by some prowling animal. Gradually my fears became lulled into a sense of security. Whether his remains were above ground or below, Crazy Jake was dead and unrecognizable by this time, I argued with myself, and his secret had perished with him. My fears slept so soundly that the rude shock of their awakening almost unsettled my reason.

"It happened like this: It was a night in winter, six months, almost to the very day, after the affair that I have just described. It was intensely cold, and the snow, which had fallen heavily throughout the day, lay thick upon the ground. But I was cozy enough, sitting in my easy-chair in front of a roaring fire in the library of Moor Lodge, with my pipe alight and a recently published scientific volume on my lap. My wife had retired early in consequence of a slight chill, and I was alone.

"A faint, fumbling sound at the window made me glance up, though there was nothing more in my mind than a mere idle curiosity as to the origin of the sound. But the moment I rested my eyes on the casement I felt my limbs grow stiff with stark, paralyzing terror.

"Gazing fixedly at me through the glass, his face and figure clear and unmistakable in the bright rays of the moon, was Crazy Jake—the man whom I had last seen a hideously maimed corpse, blown literally in halves by the terrible fulminator whose secret he had been about to betray!"

Professor Felger's attempts to obtain possession of the formula make next month's installment of this story one of many thrills. Don't miss it.

The Pale Man

By JULIUS LONG

A queer little tale, about the eccentric behavior of a strange guest in a country hotel

I HAVE not yet met the man in No. 212. I do not even know his name. He never patronizes the hotel restaurant, and he does not use the lobby. On the three occasions when we passed each other by, we did not speak, although we nodded in a semi-cordial, noncommittal way. I should like very much to make his acquaintance. It is lonesome in this dreary place. With the exception of the aged lady down the corridor, the only permanent guests are the man in No. 212 and myself. However, I should not complain, for this utter quiet is precisely what the doctor prescribed.

I wonder if the man in No. 212, too, has come here for a rest. He is so very pale. Yet I can not believe that he is ill, for his paleness is not of a sickly cast, but rather wholesome in its ivory clarity. His carriage is that of a man enjoying the best of health. He is tall and straight. He walks erectly and with a brisk, athletic stride. His pallor is no doubt congenital, else he would quickly tan under this burning, summer sun.

He must have traveled here by auto, for he certainly was not a passenger on the train that brought me, and he checked in only a short time after my arrival. I had briefly rested in my room and was walking down the stairs when I encountered him ascending with his bag. It is odd that our venerable bell-boy did not show him to his room.

It is odd, too, that, with so many vacant rooms in the hotel, he should have chosen No. 212 at the extreme rear. The building is a long, narrow affair three stories high. The rooms are all on the east side, as the west wall is flush with a decrepit business building. The corridor is long and drab, and its stiff, bloated paper exudes a musty, unpleasant odor. The feeble electric bulbs that light it shine dimly as from a tomb. Revolted by this corridor, I insisted vigorously upon being given No. 201, which is at the front and blessed with southern exposure. The room clerk, a disagreeable fellow with a Hitler mustache, was very reluctant to let me have it, as it is ordinarily reserved for his more profitable transient trade. I fear my stubborn insistence has made him an enemy.

If only I had been as self-assertive thirty years ago! I should now be a full-fledged professor instead of a broken-down assistant. I still smart from the cavalier manner in which the president of the university summarily recommended my vacation. No doubt he acted for my best interests. The people who have dominated my poor life invariably have.

Oh, well, the summer's rest will probably do me considerable good. It is pleasant to be away from the university. There is something positively gratifying about the absence of the graduate student face.

If only it were not so lonely! I must devise a way of meeting the pale man in No. 212. Perhaps the room clerk can arrange matters.

I HAVE been here exactly a week, and if there is a friendly soul in this miserable little town, he has escaped my notice. Although the tradespeople accept my money with flattering eagerness, they studiously avoid even the most casual conversation. I am afraid I can never cultivate their society unless I can arrange to have my ancestors recognized as local residents for the last hundred and fifty years.

Despite the coolness of my reception, I have been frequently venturing abroad. In the back of my mind I have cherished hopes that I might encounter the pale man in No. 211. Incidentally, I wonder why he has moved from No. 212. There is certainly little advantage in coming only one room nearer to the front. I noticed the change yesterday when I saw him coming out of his new room.

We nodded again, and this time I thought I detected a certain malign satisfaction in his somber, black eyes. He must know that I am eager to make his acquaintance, yet his manner forbids overtures. If he wants to make me go all the way, he can go to the devil. I am not the sort to run after anybody. Indeed, the surly diffidence of the room clerk has been enough to prevent me from questioning him about his mysterious guest.

I WONDER where the pale man takes his meals. I have been absenting myself from the hotel restaurant and patronizing the restaurants outside. At each I have ventured inquiries about the man in No. 210. No one at any restaurant remembered his having been there. Perhaps he has entrée into the Brahmin homes of this town. And again, he may have found a boarding-house. I shall have to learn if there be one.

The pale man must be difficult to please, for he has again changed his room. I am baffled by his conduct. If he is so desirous of locating himself more conveniently in the hotel, why does he not move to No. 202, which is the nearest available room to the front?

Perhaps I can make his inability to locate himself permanently an excuse for starting a conversation. "I see we are closer neighbors now," I might casually say. But that is too banal. I must await a better opportunity.

HE HAS done it again! He is now occupying No. 209. I am intrigued by his little game. I waste hours trying to fathom its point. What possible motive could he have? I should think he would get on the hotel people's nerves. I wonder what our combination bellhop-chambermaid thinks of having to prepare four rooms for a single guest. If he were not stone-deaf, I would ask him. At present I feel too exhausted to attempt such an enervating conversation.

I am tremendously interested in the pale man's next move. He must either skip a room or remain where he is, for a permanent guest, a very old lady, occupies No. 208. She has not budged from her room since I have been here, and I imagine that she does not intend to.

I wonder what the pale man will do. I await his decision with the nervous excitement of a devotee of the track on the eve of a big race. After all, I have so little diversion.

WELL, the mysterious guest was not forced to remain where he was, nor did he have to skip a room. The lady in No. 208 simplified matters by conveniently dying. No one knows the cause of her death, but it is generally attributed to old age. She was buried this morning. I was among the curious few who attended her funeral. When I returned home from the mortuary, I was in time to see the pale

man leaving her room. Already he has moved in.

He favored me with a smile whose meaning I have tried in vain to decipher. I can not but believe that he meant it to have some significance. He acted as if there were between us some secret that I failed to appreciate. But, then, perhaps his smile was meaningless after all and only ambiguous by chance, like that of the Mona Lisa.

MY MAN of mystery now resides in No. 207, and I am not the least surprized. I would have been astonished if he had not made his scheduled move. I have almost given up trying to understand his eccentric conduct. I do not know a single thing more about him than I knew the day he arrived. I wonder whence he came. There is something indefinably foreign about his manner. I am curious to hear his voice. I like to imagine that he speaks the exotic tongue of some far-away country. If only I could somehow inveigle him into conversation! I wish that I were possessed of the glib assurance of a college boy, who can address himself to the most distinguished celebrity without batting an eye. It is no wonder that I am only an assistant professor.

I AM worried. This morning I awoke to find myself lying prone upon the floor. I was fully clothed. I must have fallen exhausted there after I returned to my room last night.

I wonder if my condition is more serious than I had suspected. Until now I have been inclined to discount the fears of those who have pulled a long face about me. For the first time I recall the prolonged hand-clasp of the president when he bade me good-bye from the university. Obviously he never expected to see me alive again.

Of course I am not that unwell. Nevertheless, I must be more careful. Thank heaven I have no dependents to worry about. I have not even a wife, for I was never willing to exchange the loneliness of a bachelor for the loneliness of a husband.

I can say in all sincerity that the prospect of death does not frighten me. Speculation about life beyond the grave has always bored me. Whatever it is, or is not, I'll try to get along.

I have been so preoccupied about the sudden turn of my own affairs that I have neglected to make note of a most extraordinary incident. The pale man has done an astounding thing. He has skipped three rooms and moved all the way to No. 203. We are now very close neighbors. We shall meet oftener, and my chances for making his acquaintance are now greater.

I HAVE confined myself to my bed during the last few days and have had my food brought to me. I even called a local doctor, whom I suspect to be a quack. He looked me over with professional indifference and told me not to leave my room. For some reason he does not want me to climb stairs. For this bit of information he received a ten-dollar bill which, as I directed him, he fished out of my coat pocket. A pickpocket could not have done it better.

He had not been gone long when I was visited by the room clerk. That worthy suggested with a great show of kindly concern that I use the facilities of the local hospital. It was so modern and all that. With more firmness than I have been able to muster in a long time, I gave him to understand that I intended to remain where I am. Frowning sullenly, he

stiffly retired. The doctor must have paused long enough downstairs to tell him a pretty story. It is obvious that he is afraid I shall die in his best room.

The pale man is up to his old tricks. Last night, when I tottered down the hall, the door of No. 202 was ajar. Without thinking, I looked inside. The pale man sat in a rocking-chair idly smoking a cigarette. He looked up into my eyes and smiled that peculiar, ambiguous smile that has so deeply puzzled me. I moved on down the corridor, not so much mystified as annoyed. The whole mystery of the man's conduct is beginning to irk me. It is all so inane, so utterly lacking in motive.

I feel that I shall never meet the pale man. But, at least, I am going to learn his identity. Tomorrow I shall ask for the room clerk and deliberately interrogate him.

I KNOW now. I know the identity of the pale man, and I know the meaning of his smile.

Early this afternoon I summoned the room clerk to my bedside.

"Please tell me," I asked abruptly, "who is the man in No. 202?"

The clerk stared wearily and uncomprehendingly.

"You must be mistaken. That room is unoccupied."

"Oh, but it is," I snapped in irritation. "I myself saw the man there only two nights ago. He is a tall, handsome fellow with dark eyes and hair. He is unusually pale. He checked in the day that I arrived."

The hotel man regarded me dubiously, as if I were trying to impose upon him.

"But I assure you there is no such person in the house. As for his checking in when you did, you were the only guest we registered that day."

"What? Why, I've seen him twenty times! First he had No. 212 at the end of the corridor. Then he kept moving toward the front. Now he's next door in No. 202."

The room clerk threw up his hands.

"You're crazy!" he exclaimed, and I saw that he meant what he said.

I shut up at once and dismissed him. After he had gone, I heard him rattling the knob of the pale man's door. There is no doubt that he believes the room to be empty.

Thus it is that I can now understand the events of the past few weeks. I now comprehend the significance of the death in No. 207. I even feel partly responsible for the old lady's passing. After all, I brought the pale man with me. But it was not I who fixed his path. Why he chose to approach me room after room through the length of this dreary hotel, why his path crossed the threshold of the woman in No. 207, those mysteries I can not explain.

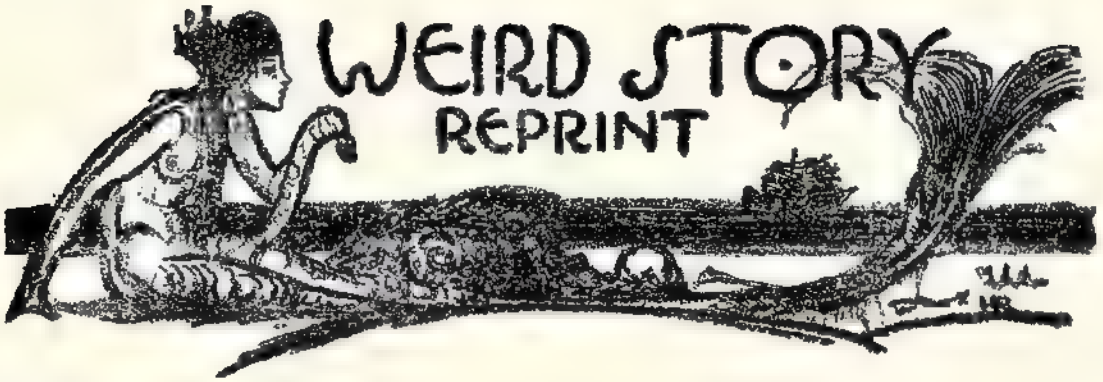
I suppose I should have guessed his identity when he skipped the three rooms the night I fell unconscious upon the floor. In a single night of triumph he advanced until he was almost to my door.

He will be coming by and by to inhabit this room, his ultimate goal. When he comes, I shall at least be able to return his smile of grim recognition.

Meanwhile, I have only to wait beyond my bolted door.

* * * * *

The door swings slowly open. . . .



The Coming of Abel Behenna

By BRAM STOKER

THE little Cornish port of Pencastle was bright in the early April, when the sun had seemingly come to stay after a long and bitter winter. Boldly and blackly the rock stood out against a background of shaded blue, where the sky fading into mist met the far horizon. The sea was of true Cornish hue—sapphire, save where it became deep emerald green in the fathomless depths under the cliffs, where the seal caves opened their grim jaws. On the slopes the grass was parched and brown. The spikes of furze bushes were ashy gray, but the golden yellow of their flowers streamed along the hillside, dipping out in lines as the rock cropped up, and lessening into patches and dots till finally it died away altogether where the sea winds swept round the jutting cliffs and cut short the vegetation as though with an ever-working aerial shears. The whole hillside, with its body of brown and flashes of yellow, was like a colossal yellow-hammer.

The little harbor opened from the sea between towering cliffs, and behind a lonely rock, pierced with many caves and blow-holes through which the sea in storm time sent its thunderous voice, together with a fountain of drifting spume. Hence, it wound westward in a serpentine course, guarded at its entrance by two little curving piers to left and right. These were roughly built of dark slates placed endways and held together with great beams bound with iron bands. Thence it flowed up the rocky bed of the stream whose winter torrents had of old cut out its way amongst the hills. This stream was deep at first, with here and there, where it widened, patches of broken rock exposed at low water, full of holes where crabs and lobsters were to be found at the ebb of the tide. From among the rocks rose sturdy posts, used for warping in the little coasting-vessels which frequented the port. Higher up, the stream still flowed deeply, for the tide ran far inland, but always calmly, for all the force of the wildest storm was broken below.

Some quarter-mile inland the stream was deep at high water, but at low tide

there were at each side patches of the same broken rock as lower down, through the chinks of which the sweet water of the natural stream trickled and murmured after the tide had ebbed away. Here, too, rose mooring-posts for the fishermen's boats. At either side of the river was a row of cottages down almost on the level of high tide. They were pretty cottages, strongly and snugly built, with trim narrow gardens in front, full of old-fashioned plants, flowering currants, colored primroses, wallflowers, and stonecrops. Over the fronts of many of them climbed clematis and wisteria. The window-sides and door-posts of all were as white as snow, and the little pathway to each was paved with light-colored stones. At some of the doors were tiny porches, whilst at others were rustic seats cut from tree trunks or from old barrels; in nearly every case the window-ledges were filled with boxes or pots of flowers or foliage plants.

Two men lived in cottages exactly opposite each other across the stream. Two men, both young, both good-looking, both prosperous, and who had been companions and rivals from their boyhood. Abel Behenna was dark with the gipsy darkness which the Phenician mining wanderers left in their track; Eric Sanson —which the local antiquarian said was a corruption of Sagamanson — was fair, with the ruddy hue which marked the path of the wild Norseman. These two seemed to have singled out each other from the very beginning to work and strive together, to fight for each other and to stand back to back in all endeavors. They had now put the coping-stone on their Temple of Unity by falling in love with the same girl.

Sarah Trefusis was certainly the prettiest girl in Pencastle, and there was many a young man who would gladly have tried his fortune with her, but that there were two to contend against, and each of these the strongest and most resolute man in the port—except the other. The average young man thought that this was very hard, and on account of it bore no good will to either of the three principals: whilst the average young woman who had, lest worse should befall, to put up with the grumbling of her sweetheart, and the sense of being only second best which it implied, did not either, be sure, regard Sarah with friendly eye.

Thus it came, in the course of a year or so, for rustic courtship is a slow process, that the two men and the woman found themselves thrown much together. They were all satisfied, so it did not matter, and Sarah, who was vain and somewhat frivolous, took care to have her revenge on both men and women in a quiet way. When a young woman in her "walking out" can only boast one not-quite-satisfied young man, it is no particular pleasure to her to see her escort cast sheep's eyes at a better-looking girl supported by two devoted swains.

At length there came a time which Sarah dreaded, and which she had tried to keep distant—the time when she had to make her choice between the two men. She liked them both, and, indeed, either of them might have satisfied the ideas of even a more exacting girl. But her mind was so constituted that she thought more of what she might lose than of what she might gain; and whenever she thought she had made up her mind she became instantly assailed with doubts as to the wisdom of her choice. Always the man whom she had presumably lost became endowed afresh with a newer and more bountiful crop of advantages than had ever arisen from the possibility of his acceptance. She promised each man that on her birthday she would give him his answer, and that day had now arrived.

The promises had been given singly and confidentially, but each was given to a man who was not likely to forget. Early in the morning she found both men hovering round her door. Neither had taken the other into his confidence, and each was simply seeking an early opportunity of getting his answer, and advancing his suit if necessary. Damon, as a rule, does not take Pythias with him when making a proposal; and in the heart of each man his own affairs had a claim far above any requirements of friendship. So, throughout the day, they kept seeing each other out. The position was doubtless somewhat embarrassing to Sarah, and though the satisfaction of her vanity that she should be thus adored was very pleasing, yet there were moments when she was annoyed with both men for being so persistent. Her only consolation at such moments was that she saw, through the elaborate smiles of the other girls when in passing they noticed her door thus doubly guarded, the jealousy which filled their hearts.

Sarah's mother was a person of commonplace and sordid ideas, and, seeing all along the state of affairs, her one intention, persistently expressed to her daughter in the plainest of words, was to so arrange matters that Sarah should get all that was possible out of both men. With this purpose she had cunningly kept herself as far as possible in the background in the matter of her daughter's wooings, and watched in silence. At first Sarah had been indignant with her for her sordid views; but, as usual, her weak nature gave way before persistence, and she had now got to the stage of passive acceptance. She was not surprized when her mother whispered to her in the little yard behind the house:

"Go up the hillside for a while; I want to talk to these two. They're both red-hot for ye, and now's the time to get things fixed!"

Sarah began a feeble remonstrance, but her mother cut her short.

"I tell ye, girl, that my mind is made up! Both these men want ye, and only one can have ye, but before ye choose it'll be so arranged that ye'll have all that both have got! Don't argy, child! Go up the hillside, and when ye come back I'll have it fixed—I see a way quite easy!"

SO SARAH went up the hillside through the narrow paths between the golden furze, and Mrs. Trefusis joined the two men in the living-room of the little house.

She opened the attack with the desperate courage which is in all mothers when they think for their children, howsoever mean the thoughts may be.

"Ye two men, ye're both in love with my Sarah!"

Their bashful silence gave consent to the barefaced proposition. She went on:

"Neither of ye has much!"

Again they tacitly acquiesced in the soft impeachment.

"I don't know that either of ye could keep a wife!"

Though neither said a word their looks and bearing expressed distinct dissent. Mrs. Trefusis went on:

"But if ye'd put what ye both have together ye'd make a comfortable home for one of ye—and Sarah!"

She eyed the men keenly, with her cunning eyes half shut, as she spoke; then, satisfied from her scrutiny that the idea was accepted, she went on quickly, as if to prevent argument:

"The girl likes ye both, and mayhap it's hard for her to choose. Why don't ye toss up for her? First put your money together—ye've each got a bit put by, I know. Let the lucky man take the lot and

trade with it a bit, and then come home and marry her. Neither of ye's afraid, I suppose. And neither of ye'll say that he won't do that much for the girl that ye both say ye love."

Abel broke the silence:

"It don't seem the square thing to toss for the girl. She wouldn't like it herself, and it doesn't seem respectful-like to her——"

Eric interrupted. He was conscious that his chance was not so good as Abel's, in case Sarah should wish to choose between them:

"Are ye afraid of the hazard?"

"Not me!" said Abel, boldly.

Mrs. Trefusis, seeing that her idea was beginning to work, followed up the advantage:

"It is settled that ye put yer money together to make a home for her, whether ye toss for her or leave it for her to choose?"

"Yes," said Eric quickly, and Abel agreed with equal sturdiness.

Mrs. Trefusis' little cunning eyes twinkled. She heard Sarah's step in the yard, and said:

"Well! here she comes, and I leave it to her." And she went out.

DURING her brief walk on the hillside Sarah had been trying to make up her mind. She was feeling almost angry with both men for being the cause of her difficulty, and as she came into the room said shortly:

"I want to have a word with you both —come to the Flagstaff Rock, where we can be alone."

She took her hat and went out of the house up the winding path to the steep rock crowned with a high flagstaff, where once the wreckers' fire-basket used to burn. This was the rock which formed the northern jaw of the little harbor. There was only room on the path for two abreast, and it marked the state of things pretty well when, by a sort of implied arrangement, Sarah went first, and the two men followed, walking abreast and keeping step. By this time, each man's heart was boiling with jealousy. When they came to the top of the rock, Sarah stood against the flagstaff, and the two young men stood opposite her. She had chosen her position with knowledge and intention, for there was no room for any one to stand beside her. They were all silent for a while; then Sarah began to laugh and said:

"I promised the both of you to give you an answer today. I've been thinking and thinking and thinking, till I began to get angry with you both for plaguing me so; and even now I don't seem any nearer than ever I was to making up my mind."

Eric said suddenly: "Let us toss for it, lass!"

Sarah showed no indignation whatever at the proposition; her mother's eternal suggestion had schooled her to the acceptance of something of the kind, and her weak nature made it easy to her to grasp at any way out of the difficulty. She stood with downcast eyes, idly picking at the sleeve of her dress, seeming to have tacitly acquiesced in the proposal. Both men instinctively realizing this pulled each a coin from his pocket, spun it in the air, and dropped his other hand over the palm on which it lay. For a few seconds they remained thus, all silent; then Abel, who was the more thoughtful of the men, spoke:

"Sarah! is this good?"

As he spoke he removed the upper hand from the coin and placed the latter back in his pocket. Sarah was nettled.

"Good or bad, it's good enough for me! Take it or leave it as you like," she said, to which he replied quickly:

"Nay, lass! Aught that concerns you is good enow for me. I did but think of you lest you might have pain or disappointment hereafter. If you love Eric better nor me, in God's name say so, and I think I'm man enow to stand aside. Likewise, if I'm the one, don't make us both miserable for life."

Face to face with a difficulty, Sarah's weak nature proclaimed itself; she put her hands before her face and began to cry, saying:

"It was my mother. She keeps telling me."

The silence which followed was broken by Eric, who said hotly to Abel:

"Let the lass alone, can't you? If she wants to choose this way, let her. It's good enough for me—and for you, too! She's said it now, and must abide by it."

Hereupon Sarah turned upon him in sudden fury, and cried:

"Hold your tongue! What is it to you, at any rate?" and she resumed her crying.

Eric was so flabbergasted that he had not a word to say, but stood looking foolish, with his mouth open and his hands held out with the coin still between them. All were silent till Sarah, taking her hands from her face, laughed hysterically and said:

"As you two can't make up your minds, I'm going home!" and she turned to go.

"Stop!" said Abel, in an authoritative voice. "Eric, you hold the coin, and I'll cry. Now, before we settle it, let us clearly understand: the man who wins takes all the money that we both have got, brings it to Bristol and ships on a voyage and trades with it. Then he comes back and marries Sarah, and they two keep all, whatever there may be, as the result of the trading. Is this what we understand?"

"Yes," said Eric.

"I'll marry him on my next birthday," said Sarah. Having said it, the intolerably mercenary spirit of her action seemed to strike her, and impulsively she turned away with a bright blush. Fire seemed to sparkle in the eyes of both the men.

Said Eric: "A year so be! The man that wins is to have one year."

"Toss!" cried Abel, and the coin spun in the air. Eric caught it, and again held it between his outstretched hands.

"Heads!" cried Abel, a pallor sweeping over his face as he spoke.

As he leaned forward to look, Sarah leaned forward too, and their heads almost touched. He could feel her hair blowing on his cheek, and it thrilled through him like fire. Eric lifted his upper hand; the coin lay with its head up. Abel stepped forward and took Sarah in his arms. With a curse Eric hurled the coin far into the sea. Then he leaned against the flagstaff and scowled at the others with his hands thrust deep in his pockets. Abel whispered wild words of passion and delight into Sarah's ears, and as she listened she began to believe that fortune had rightly interpreted the wishes of her secret heart, and that she loved Abel best.

PRESENTLY Abel looked up and caught sight of Eric's face as the last ray of sunset struck it. The red light intensified the natural ruddiness of his complexion, and he looked as though he were steeped in blood. Abel did not mind his scowl, for now that his own heart was at rest he could feel unalloyed pity for his friend. He stepped over, meaning to comfort him, and held out his hand, saying:

"It was my chance, old lad. Don't grudge it me. I'll try to make Sarah a happy woman, and you shall be a brother to us both."

"Brother be damned!" was all the answer Eric made, as he turned away.

When he had gone a few steps down the rocky path he turned and came back. Standing before Abel and Sarah, who had their arms round each other, he said:

"You have a year. Make the most of it! And be sure you're in time to claim your wife! Be back to have your bans up in time to be married on the 11th of April. If you're not, I tell you I shall have my bans up, and you may get back too late."

"What do you mean, Eric? You are mad!"

"No more mad than you are, Abel Behenna. You go, that's your chance! I stay, that's mine! I don't mean to let the grass grow under my feet. Sarah cared no more for you than for me five minutes ago, and she may come back to that five minutes after you're gone! You won by a point only—the game may change."

"The game won't change!" said Abel shortly. "Sarah, you'll be true to me? You won't marry till I return?"

"For a year!" added Eric, quickly; "that's the bargain."

"I promise for the year," said Sarah. A dark look came over Abel's face, and he was about to speak, but he mastered himself and smiled.

"I mustn't be too hard or get angry tonight. Come, Eric! we played and fought together. I won fairly. I played fairly all the game of our wooing. You know that as well as I do; and now when I am going away, I shall look to my old and true comrade to help me when I am gone."

"I'll help you none," said Eric, "so help me God!"

"It was God helped me," said Abel, simply.

"Then let Him go on helping you," said Eric angrily. "The Devil is good enough for me!" and without another word he rushed down the steep path and disappeared behind the rocks.

When he had gone Abel hoped for some tender passage with Sarah, but the first remark she made chilled him:

"How lonely it all seems without Eric!" and this note sounded till he had left her at home—and after.

Early on the next morning Abel heard a noise at his door, and on going out saw Eric walking rapidly away; a small canvas bag full of gold and silver lay on the threshold; on a small slip of paper pinned to it was written:

> Take the money and go. I stay. God for you! The Devil for me! Remember the 11th of April.
> ERIC SANSON.

That afternoon Abel went off to Bristol, and a week later sailed on the *Star of the Sea* bound for Pahang. His money—including that which had been Eric's—was on board in the shape of a venture of cheap toys. He had been advised by a shrewd old mariner of Bristol whom he knew, and who knew the ways of the Chersonese, who predicted that every penny invested would be returned with a shilling to boot.

As THE year wore on, Sarah became more and more disturbed in her mind. Eric was always at hand to make love to her in his own persistent, masterful manner, and to this she did not object. Only one letter came from Abel, to say that his venture had proved successful, and that he had sent some two hundred pounds to the bank at Bristol, and was trading with fifty pounds still remaining in goods for China, whither the *Star of the Sea* was bound and whence she would return to Bristol. He suggested that Eric's share of the venture should be returned to him with his share of the profits. This proposition was treated with

anger by Eric, and as simply childish by Sarah's mother.

More than six months had since then elapsed, but no other letter had come, and Eric's hopes, which had been dashed down by the letter from Pahang, began to rise again. He perpetually assailed Sarah with an "if!" If Abel did not return, would she then marry him? If the 11th of April went by without Abel being in the port, would she give him over? If Abel had taken his fortune, and married another girl on the head of it, would she marry him, Eric, as soon as the truth were known? And so on in an endless variety of possibilities.

The power of the strong will and the determined purpose over the woman's weaker nature became in time manifest. Sarah began to lose her faith in Abel and to regard Eric as a possible husband; and a possible husband is in a woman's eye different from all other men. A new affection for him began to arise in her breast, and the daily familiarities of permitted courtship furthered the growing affection. Sarah began to regard Abel as rather a rock in the road of her life, and had it not been for her mother's constantly reminding her of the good fortune already laid by in the Bristol bank she would have tried to shut her eyes altogether to the fact of Abel's existence.

The 11th of April was Saturday, so that in order to have the marriage on that day it would be necessary that the bans should be called on Sunday, the 22nd of March. From the beginning of that month Eric kept perpetually on the subject of Abel's absence, and his outspoken opinion that the latter was either dead or married began to become a reality to the woman's mind. As the first half of the month wore on, Eric became more jubilant, and after church on the 15th he took Sarah for a walk to the Flagstaff Rock. There he asserted himself strongly:

"I told Abel, and you too, that if he was not here to put up his bans in time for the eleventh, I would put up mine for the twelfth. Now the time has come when I mean to do it. He hasn't kept his word——"

Here Sarah struck in out of her weakness and indecision: "He hasn't broken it yet!"

Eric ground his teeth with anger. "If you mean to stick up for him," he said, as he smote his hands savagely on the flagstaff, which sent forth a shivering murmur, "well and good. I'll keep my part of the bargain. On Sunday I shall give notice of the bans, and you can deny them in the church if you will. If Abel is in Pencastle on the eleventh, he can have them canceled, and his own put up; but till then, I take my course, and wo to any one who stands in my way!"

With that he flung himself down the rocky pathway, and Sarah could not but admire his Viking strength and spirit, as crossing the hill, he strode away along the cliffs toward Bude.

During the week no news was heard of Abel, and on Saturday Eric gave notice of the bans of marriage between himself and Sarah Trefusis. The clergyman would have remonstrated with him, for although nothing formal had been told to the neighbors, it had been understood since Abel's departure that on his return he was to marry Sarah; but Eric would not discuss the question.

"It is a painful subject, sir," he said with a firmness which the parson, who was a very young man, could not but be swayed by. "Surely there is nothing against Sarah or me. Why should there be any bones made about the matter?"

The parson said no more, and on the next day he read out the bans for the first time amidst an audible buzz from the

congregation. Sarah was present, contrary to custom, and though she blushed furiously enjoyed her triumph over the other girls whose bans had not yet come.

Before the week was over she began to make her wedding dress. Eric used to come and look at her at work and the sight thrilled through him. He used to say all sorts of pretty things to her at such times, and there were to both delicious moments of love-making.

The bans were read a second time on the 29th, and Eric's hope grew more and more fixed, though there were to him moments of acute despair when he realized that the cup of happiness might be dashed from his lips at any moment, right up to the last. At such times he was full of passion—desperate and remorseless—and he ground his teeth and clenched his hands in a wild way as though some taint of the Berserker fury of his ancestors still lingered in his blood. On the Thursday of that week he looked in on Sarah and found her, amid a flood of sunshine, putting finishing touches to her white wedding gown. His own heart was full of gayety, and the sight of the woman who was so soon to be his own so occupied, filled him with a joy unspeakable, and he felt faint with a languorous ecstasy. Bending over he kissed Sarah on the mouth, and then whispered in her rosy ear:

"Your wedding dress, Sarah! And for me!"

As he drew back to admire her she looked up saucily, and said to him: "Perhaps not for you. There is more than a week yet for Abel!" and then cried out in dismay, for with a wild gesture and a fierce oath Eric dashed out of the house, banging the door behind him.

The incident disturbed Sarah more than she could have thought possible, for it awoke all her fears and doubts and indecision afresh. She cried a little, and put by her dress, and to soothe herself went out to sit for a while on the summit of the Flagstaff Rock. When she arrived she found there a little group anxiously discussing the weather. The sea was calm and the sun bright, but across the sea were strange lines of darkness and light, and close in to shore the rocks were fringed with foam, which spread out in great white curves and circles as the currents drifted. The wind had backed, and came in sharp, cold puffs. The blow-hole, which ran under the Flagstaff Rock, from the rocky bay without to the Harbor within, was booming at intervals, and the sea-gulls were screaming ceaselessly as they wheeled about the entrance of the port.

"It looks bad," she heard an old fisherman say to the coast guard. "I seen it just like this once before, when the East Indiaman *Coromandel* went to pieces in Dizzard Bay!"

Sarah did not wait to hear more. She was of a timid nature where danger was concerned, and could not bear to hear of wrecks and disasters. She went home and resumed the completion of her dress, secretly determined to appease Eric when she should meet him with a sweet apology—and to take the earliest opportunity of being even with him after her marriage.

THE old fisherman's weather prophecy was justified. That night at dusk a wild storm came on. The sea rose and lashed the western coasts of Skye to Scilly and left a tale of disaster everywhere. The sailors and fishermen of Pencastle all turned out on the rocks and cliffs and watched eagerly. Presently, by a flash of lightning, a ketch was seen drifting under only a jib about half a mile outside the port. All eyes and all glasses were concen-

trated on her, waiting for the next flash, and when it came a chorus went up that it was the *Lovely Alice*, trading between Bristol and Penzance, and touching at all the little ports between. "God help them!" said the harbormaster, "for nothing in this world can save them when they are between Bude and Tintagel and the wind on shore."

The coast guards exerted themselves, and, aided by brave hearts and willing hands, they brought the rocket apparatus up on the summit of the Flagstaff Rock. Then they burned blue lights so that those on board might see the harbor opening in case they could make any effort to reach it. They worked gallantly enough on board; but no skill or strength of man could avail. Before many minutes were over the *Lovely Alice* rushed to her doom on the great island rock that guarded the mouth of the port. The screams of those on board were fairly borne on the tempest as they flung themselves into the sea in a last chance for life. The blue lights were kept burning, and eager eyes peered into the depths of the waters in case any face could be seen; and ropes were held ready to fling out in aid. But never a face was seen, and the willing arms rested idle.

Eric was there amongst his fellows. His old Icelandic origin was never more apparent than in that wild hour. He took a rope, and shouted in the ear of the harbor-master:

"I shall go down on the rock over the seal cave. The tide is running up, and some one may drift in there."

"Keep back, man!" came the answer. "Are you mad? One slip on that rock and you are lost: and no man could keep his feet in the dark on such a place in such a tempest!"

"Not a bit," came the reply. "You remember how Abel Behenna saved me there on a night like this when my boat went on the Gull Rock. He dragged me up from the deep water in the seal cave, and now some one may drift in there again as I did," and he was gone into the darkness.

The projecting rock hid the light on the Flagstaff Rock, but he knew his way too well to miss it. His boldness and sureness of foot standing to him, he shortly stood on the great round-topped rock cut away beneath by the action of the waves over the entrance of the seal cave, where the water was fathomless. There he stood in comparative safety, for the concave shape of the rock beat back the waves with their own force, and though the water below him seemed to boil like a seething cauldron, just beyond the spot there was a space of almost calm. The rock, too, seemed here to shut off the sound of the gale, and he listened as well as watched. As he stood there ready, with his coil of rope poised to throw, he thought he heard below him, just beyond the whirl of the water, a faint, despairing cry. He echoed it with a shout that rang out into the night. Then he waited for the flash of lightning, and as it passed flung his rope out into the darkness where he had seen a face rising through the swirl of the foam. The rope was caught, for he felt a pull on it, and he shouted again in his mighty voice:

"Tie it round your waist, and I shall pull you up."

Then when he felt that it was fast he moved along the rock to the far side of the seal cave, where the deep water was something stiller, and where he could get foothold secure enough to drag the rescued man on the overhanging rock. He began to pull, and shortly he knew from the rope taken in that the man he was now rescuing must soon be close to the top of the rock. He steadied himself for

a moment, and drew a long breath, that he might at the next effort complete the rescue. He had just bent his back to the work when a flash of lightning revealed to each other the two men—the rescuer and the rescued.

Eric Sanson and Abel Behenna were face to face, and none knew of the meeting save themselves—and God.

On the instant a wave of passion swept through Eric's heart. All his hopes were shattered, and with the hatred of Cain his eyes looked out. He saw in the instant of recognition the joy in Abel's face that his was the hand to succor him, and this intensified his hate. Whilst the passion was on him he started back, and the rope ran out between his hands. His moment of hate was followed by an impulse of his better manhood, but it was too late.

Before he could recover himself, Abel, encumbered with the rope that should have aided him, was plunged with a despairing cry back into the darkness of the devouring sea.

Then, feeling all the madness and the doom of Cain upon him, Eric rushed back over the rocks, heedless of the danger and eager only for one thing—to be amongst other people whose living noises would shut out that last cry which seemed to ring still in his ears. When he regained the Flagstaff Rock the men surrounded him, and through the fury of the storm he heard the harbor-master say:

"We feared you were lost when we heard a cry. How white you are! Where is your rope? Was there any one drifted in?"

"No one," he shouted in answer, for he felt that he could never explain that he had let his old comrade slip back into the sea, and at the very place and under the very circumstances in which that comrade had saved his own life. He hoped by one bold lie to set the matter at rest for ever. There was no one to bear witness—and if he should have to carry that still white face in his eyes and that despairing cry in his ears for evermore, at least none should know of it. "No one," he cried, more loudly still. "I slipped on the rock, and the rope fell into the sea." So saying he left them, and, rushing down the steep path, gained his own cottage and locked himself within.

The remainder of that night he passed lying on his bed—dressed and motionless—staring upward, and seeming to see through the darkness a pale face gleaming wet in the lightning, with its glad recognition turning to ghastly despair, and to hear a cry which never ceased to echo in his soul.

In the morning the storm was over and all was smiling again, except that the sea was still boisterous with its unspent fury. Great pieces of wreck drifted into the port, and the sea around the island rock was strewn with others. Two bodies also drifted into the harbor—one the master of the wrecked ketch, the other a strange seaman whom no one knew.

SARAH saw nothing of Eric till the evening, and then he only looked in for a minute. He did not come into the house, but simply put his head in through the open window.

"Well, Sarah," he called out in a loud voice, though to her it did not ring truly, "is the wedding dress done? Sunday week, mind! Sunday week!"

Sarah was glad to have the reconciliation so easy; but, woman-like, when she saw the storm was over and her own fears groundless, she at once repeated the cause of offense.

"Sunday so be it," she said, without looking up, "if Abel isn't there on Saturday!" Then she looked up saucily, though her heart was full of fear of another out-

burst on the part of her impetuous lover. But the window was empty; Eric had taken himself off, and with a pout she resumed her work.

She saw Eric no more till Sunday afternoon, after the bans had been called the third time, when he came up to her before all the people with an air of proprietorship which half pleased and half annoyed her.

"Not yet, mister!" she said, pushing him away, as the other girls giggled. "Wait till Sunday next, if you please—the day after Saturday!" she added, looking at him saucily.

The girls giggled again, and the young men guffawed. They thought it was the snub that touched him so that he became as white as a sheet as he turned away. But Sarah, who knew more than they did, laughed, for she saw triumph through the spasm of pain that overspread his face.

The week passed uneventfully; however, as Saturday drew nigh, Sarah had occasional moments of anxiety, and Eric went about at night-time like a man possessed. He restrained himself when others were by, but now and again he went down amongst the rocks and caves and shouted aloud. This seemed to relieve him somewhat, and he was better able to restrain himself for some time after. All Saturday he stayed in his own house and never left it. As he was to be married on the morrow, the neighbors thought it was shyness on his part, and did not trouble or notice him. Only once was he disturbed, and that was when the chief boatman came to him and sat down, and after a pause said:

"Eric, I was over in Bristol yesterday. I was in the ropemaker's getting a coil to replace the one you lost the night of the storm, and there I saw Michael Heavens of this place, who is salesman there. He told me that Abel Behenna had come home the week ere last on the *Star of the Sea* from Canton, and that he had lodged a sight of money in the Bristol Bank in the name of Sarah Behenna. He told Michael so himself—and that he had taken a passage on the *Lovely Alice* to Pencastle. Bear up, man," for Eric had with a groan dropped his head on his knees, with his face between his hands. "He was your old comrade, I know, but you couldn't help him. He must have gone down with the rest that awful night. I thought I'd better tell you, lest it might come some other way, and you might keep Sarah Trefusis from being frightened. They were good friends once, and women take these things to heart. It would not do to let her be pained with such a thing on her wedding day."

Then he rose and went away, leaving Eric still sitting disconsolately with his head on his knees.

"Poor fellow!" murmured the chief boatman to himself; "he takes it to heart. Well, well! right enough! They were true comrades once, and Abel saved him!"

The afternoon of that day, when the children had left school, they strayed as usual on half-holidays along the quay and the paths by the cliffs. Presently some of them came running in a state of great excitement to the harbor, where a few men were unloading a coal ketch, and a great many were superintending the operation. One of the children called out:

"There is a porpoise in the harbor mouth! We saw it come through the blow-hole! It had a long tail, and was deep under the water!"

"It was no porpoise," said another; "it was a seal; but it had a long tail! It came out of the seal cave."

The other children bore various testimony, but on two points they were unanimous—it, whatever it was, had come through the blow-hole deep under the

water, and had a long, thin tail—a tail so long that they could not see the end of it.

There was much unmerciful chaffing of the children by the men on this point, but as it was evident that they had seen something, quite a number of persons, young and old, male and female, went along the high paths on either side of the harbor-mouth to catch a glimpse of this new addition to the fauna of the sea, a long-tailed porpoise or seal. The tide was now coming in. There was a slight breeze, and the surface of the water was rippled so that it was only at moments that any one could see clearly into the deep water. After a spell of watching, a woman called out that she saw something moving up the channel, just below where she was standing. There was a stampede to the spot, but by the time the crowd had gathered, the breeze had freshened, and it was impossible to see with any distinctness below the surface of the water. On being questioned, the woman described what she had seen, but in such an incoherent way that the whole thing was put down as an effect of imagination; had it not been for the children's report she would not have been credited at all. Her semi-hysterical statement that what she saw was "like a pig with the entrails out" was only thought anything of by an old coast guard, who shook his head but did not make any remark. For the remainder of the daylight this man was seen always on the bank, looking into the water, but always with disappointment manifest on his face.

ERIC arose early on the next morning—he had not slept all night, and it was a relief to him to move about in the light. He shaved himself with a hand that did not tremble, and dressed himself in his wedding clothes. There was a haggard look on his face, and he seemed as though he had grown years older in the last few days. Still there was a wild, uneasy light of triumph in his eyes, and he kept murmuring to himself over and over again:

"This is my wedding day! Abel can not claim her now—living or dead!—living or dead! Living or dead!"

He sat in his armchair, waiting with an uncanny quietness for the church hour to arrive. When the bell began to ring he arose and passed out of his house, closing the door behind him. He looked at the river and saw that the tide had just turned. In the church he sat with Sarah and her mother, holding Sarah's hand tightly in his all the time, as though he feared to lose her. When the service was over they stood up together, and were married in the presence of the entire congregation; for no one left the church. Both made the responses clearly—Eric's being even on the defiant side. When the wedding was over Sarah took her husband's arm, and they walked away together, the boys and younger girls being cuffed by their elders into a decorous behavior, for they would fain have followed close behind their heels.

The way from the church led down to the back of Eric's cottage, a narrow passage being between it and that of his next neighbor. When the bridal couple had passed through this, the remainder of the congregation, who had followed them at a little distance, were startled by a long, shrill scream from the bride. They rushed through the passage and found her on the bank with wild eyes, pointing to the river bed opposite Eric Sanson's door.

The falling tide had deposited there the body of Abel Behenna stark upon the broken rocks. The rope trailing from its waist had been twisted by the current round the mooring-post, and had held it back whilst the tide had ebbed away from

it. The right elbow had fallen in a chink in the rock, leaving the hand outstretched toward Sarah, with the open palm upward as though it were extended to receive hers, the pale, drooping fingers open to the clasp.

All that happened afterward was never quite known to Sarah Sanson. Whenever she would try to recollect there would come a buzzing in her ears and a dimness in her eyes, and all would pass away. The only thing that she could remember of it at all—and this she never forgot—was Eric's breathing heavily, with his face whiter than that of the dead man, as he muttered under his breath:

"Devil's help! Devil's faith! Devil's price!"

A Cloak From Messer Lando

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A short story about Cesare Borgia and the magic of a mediaeval sorcerer

THE hooded horseman drew up before the shadowed figure crouching against the dark wall of a building backed against the alley. He bent forward and looked down. Though the streets of Rome were faintly illumined by the moonlight, the man in the alley sat in deep shadow. Yet the rider saw that he was an old man, for a beard was in evidence.

"Can you ride, old man?"

The old man looked speculatively up at the rider, eyeing his proud horse and the rich trappings bedecking both rider and steed.

"How did you know I was tired, Messer?" he asked.

"I saw you lag, and observed your footsteps grow weary. Come," he added impatiently, "will you ride, or no?"

"I will ride."

The old man got to his feet and clasped the strong hand which was extended downward to assist him to the back of the horse behind the rider.

"I was of a mind to walk tonight," murmured the old man, "but I repent it now. My bones are old."

The horse jogged forward and, as the rider half turned, his hood fell back, exposing to the moonlight a handsome, youthful face, marked by both strength and cruelty, with a mouth at the same time commanding, brutal, and sensuous. The old man's sharp eyes saw and recognized the face.

"Is it not dangerous for Your Highness to ride alone in the streets of Rome at night?" he inquired in a soft voice.

"Ah . . . you know me?"

"You are the Prince-Cardinal Cesare Borgia. There are few who do not know you," replied the old man.

"And you are not afraid, as others are?" A momentary surprize gleamed in the rider's eyes.

The old man shrugged. "I do not trust you, but neither do I fear you," he said.

"Well said, old man. Your courage belies your bones. Who are you?"

"I am one Lando, a garment-maker by occupation, by reputation a magician."

"I have heard of you."

"Kind words, Your Eminence, but mayhap of someone else." He peered out from behind the Prince-Cardinal Borgia, and added, "I dismount at the alley just ahead, if it please you."

"For one of your age, you travel in strange quarters, old man. Surely it is an odd hour to pursue your occupation."

"True," agreed Messer Lando, "but not my reputation."

Messer Lando dismounted and stood for a moment beside the horse before he said, "A pox on my bones. And my gratitude for your kindness, Your Magnificence. I shall bear it well in memory."

"I am not often kind," said the Prince-Cardinal Borgia in a cold voice.

"Therefore this kindness will be twice-remembered," replied the old man imperturbably. "Good-night."

He turned and was lost in the darkness beyond the light of the gibbous moon. Cesare Borgia jingled his trappings meditatively and rode thoughtfully away into the moonlight.

MESSER LANDO, meanwhile, made his way from door to darkened door, until at last he came upon a vast pile, at the back door of which a green lantern burned. Beneath the lantern stood a dark figure. The old man, spying him, advanced directly upon him and greeted him.

"I am here," he said.

"For His Magnificence?" asked the figure.

"Him."

"Then come."

He turned, swung open the door behind him, and led the way into the house. Messer Lando came at his heels. They passed down a long stone corridor, damp and cool, mounted a flight of stairs, and arrived at another passage. Half its length they went, to pause at last before a great door, where the guide bowed and turned back.

Messer Lando tapped gently on the door.

"Come," bade a voice from beyond the panels.

Messer Lando opened the door and entered the room. At a table near the far wall sat a middle-aged, heavy-jowled man, whose long mustache curved around his mouth. He was clad in a sable robe, and about his neck hung a golden chain from which depended a jeweled cross. This the Duke of Solento, for it was he, handled with heavily beringed fingers.

The magician advanced into the room, bowing humbly, and came to a halt before the heavy table, where, having caught the duke's eye, he waited obsequiously.

"Messer Lando," said the duke presently.

"I have come, Your Highness."

"No one has seen you?"

"None."

A momentary silence fell in the spacious, heavily draped room, and the mage stared in troubled perplexity at the face of the Duke of Solento. Something stirred in the old man's memory at sound of the duke's voice, and he remembered an incident that had happened in Florence. A small fire came into his old eyes.

Abruptly he spoke. "I have no thought as to your desire with me," he said calculatingly, "but long have I admired Your Highness, long have I wished to make you a cloak of spun gold. I lack only your permission."

The Duke of Solento peered at the old man and smiled broadly. "Flattery pleases me," he admitted unctuously. "Permission is given. But now let us

come to the matter which I have in mind. I am told you make wondrous cloaks—cloaks of such beauty that they are like fire to the wearer."

"Your Highness says it well," said the magician, inclining his head. "Those of my cloaks to which you refer are so beautiful that their wearers can wear them but once, and can not resist that wearing for the potency of their charm."

"Fire destroys," said the duke craftily.

"Like fire the fabric of my magic cloaks destroys the flesh," murmured the old man.

"You understand me well, Messer Lando. It appears that I have an enemy who is desirous of moving against me. He has power. Should he choose to exercise his power, I shall be slain, and my estates confiscated."

"His name?"

"It is not necessary for you to know."

"You need not tell me. It is Cesare, the Prince-Cardinal Borgia."

The Duke of Solento started at the magician's calm statement. "Indeed, you are a mage, Messer Lando," he said.

The magician smiled thinly, knowing the Duke of Solento for a fool, for only one man in Rome had the power described, and his name was no secret.

"Tell me, how soon can I have this cloak?"

"When the hour-glass has run its course twenty-four times, the cloak will be in your hands. But would it not be better if the cloak for the Borgia came from me, so that no suspicion might attach to you?"

"Well spoken, Messer Lando. It shall be as you say." The duke took from a pocket a pouch of ducats which he flung to the table.

Messer Lando came forward and took up the pouch.

"I shall await intelligence of the Borgia's death," said the Duke of Solento in a mockingly triumphant voice.

"I, too, shall wait, Your Highness."

"Go now, as you came."

THE magician bowed himself from the room, passed down the corridor to the lower floor, and from there once again into the soundless darkness of the alley behind the Palazzo Solento. His lips were still held in their thin, ironic smile, and his thoughts were concerned with the man he had just left, not as the Duke of Solento, but as a captain of condottieri in Florence years before. It was fitting, he reflected, that in his old years he should come upon this man again.

He made his way swiftly, disregarding the ache of his bones, and came presently to the hidden place where he made his home. He went beyond his outer rooms, beyond the room where he had brewed many a hellish potion, into another faintly lit by blue flames from a tiny brazier, a room the very atmosphere of which was potent with menace.

The mage took off his outer garments and dropped them to the floor. Then he set himself before a contrivance which no human eye but his had ever seen, and upon this queer, loom-like thing, Messer Lando wove two cloaks, one of spun gold. And while he worked, he mouthed enchantments, and spoke to the darkness, which answered him in tongues of violet flame carrying the odor of sulfur and brimstone, which the mind of man has long bound up with the powers of darkness. He mused long, too, on the heartless cruelty of that captain who had since become Duke of Solento, remembering the agony of the soldier, the mage's friend, who had died at the captain's order. And, remembering the kindness of Cesare Borgia, he smiled.

Far into the dawn he worked, far into the day. Yet the room, being window-

less, was dark. And, as he worked, two cloaks came into being beneath his fingers. Only after another night had fallen beyond his humble dwelling did Messer Lando cease work, the cloaks being finished.

Then he sat down and wrote a message from the Duke of Solento. He put his magic into words of honeyed flattery, beseeching the duke to accept from him the cloak of spun gold which His Highness had allowed Messer Lando to weave for him. Having accomplished his most artful words, Messer Lando summoned lackeys. To one he gave the message and the wondrous cloak of spun gold. To the other he gave his second cloak, a somber, smoldering red with a strangely wrought lining of silver and black.

Then only did he bethink himself of food and sleep, and with a queer, thin smile on his worn lips, he set about procuring both.

He woke at dawn, and dressed himself with feverish impatience. With the sun he entered the streets of Rome, where only the early tradesmen were about. He made his way from alley to alley, from street to street, his path being much the same as that he had made not long before at night. Presently he arrived at the Palazzo Solento.

The bustle of activity that marked the palace of the Duke of Solento was welcome to his eyes. He smiled, approached a footman, and asked, "What causes this ceaseless running to and fro?—if it please you to inform a curious old man."

The footman stopped. "The Duke of Solento is dead, and all is in uproar here. We have only just now found him lying upon the stones where he threw himself in his agony."

"He died of a fall?" murmured the mage.

The footman abruptly lowered his voice and glanced around him, shaking his head. "No, Messer. There is an unholy strangeness about his death. He wore a new cloak last night, and when he tried to take it off, he could not, and sometime in the night he threw himself from the window on the stairs. And now—when they tried to take the cloak from him, they saw that it had eaten its way into his flesh, its threads like burning tendrils of a vine, deep, deep in his body!"

Suddenly a shout went up, and the lackeys scattered like chaff before a wind. A group of well-armed horsemen had swept abruptly into the square before the palace, and were even now spreading intently around the building, surrounding it. At their head rode the Prince-Cardinal Cesare Borgia, and around his shoulders, gleaming in the early morning sunlight, he wore the red cloak from Messer Lando.

The mage smiled his pleasure. For, as the wind whipped the cloak out behind the Borgia, the mage saw his dark-woven letters as fine bars set against the lining of the cloak. And, though he could not read them, he knew that the Borgia had read them, and he remembered what he had woven:

"It pleases Messer Lando to remember a kindness and to avenge an old wrong. Ride forth and seize the estates of Solento, for he plots against your life."

Coming Next Month

AN OLD man, withered and disreputable-looking, in a robe that appeared no less antique and unsavory than himself, was standing near to the fire. He was not engaged in any visible culinary operations; and, in view of the torrid sun, it hardly seemed that he required the warmth given by the queer-colored blaze. Aside from this individual, Ralibar Vooz looked in vain for the participants of the muttered conversation he had just overheard. He thought there was an evanescent fluttering of dim, grotesque shadows around the obsidian block; but the shadows faded and vanished in an instant; and, since there were no objects or beings that could have cast them, Ralibar Vooz deemed that he had been victimized by another of those highly disagreeable optic illusions in which that part of the mountain seemed to abound.

The old man eyed the hunter with a fiery gaze and began to curse him in fluent but somewhat archaic diction as he descended into the hollow. At the same time, a lizard-tailed and sooty-feathered bird, which seemed to belong to some night-flying species of archæopteryx, began to snap its toothed beak and flap its digited wings on the objectionably shapen stela that served it for a perch. This stela, standing on the lee side of the fire and very close to it, had not been perceived by Ralibar Vooz at first glance.

"May the ordure of demons bemire you from heel to crown!" cried the venomous ancient. "O lumbering, bawling idiot! you have ruined a most promising and important evocation. How you came here I can not imagine. I have surrounded this place with twelve circles of illusion, whose effect is multiplied by their myriad intersections; and the chance that any intruder would ever find his way to my abode was mathematically small and insignificant. Ill was that chance which brought you here: for They that you have frightened away will not return until the high stars repeat a certain rare and quickly passing conjunction; and much wisdom is lost to me in the interim." . . .

The astounding adventures of Ralibar Vooz, which followed his affront to the old man, make a saga as unusual as it is interest-gripping. You can not afford to miss this strange tale, which will be published complete in WEIRD TALES for October:

THE SEVEN GEASES

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

—ALSO—

THE BLACK GOD'S KISS
By C. L. MOORE

A gripping story of a warrior maid who went down into a land of unthinkable evil in search of a strange weapon.

OLD SLEDGE
By PAUL ERNST

A strange piece of science-fiction—the story of an eccentric inventor who foretold the future by means of a weird machine.

THE SLEEPER
By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Ranjit Singh, the East Indian necromancer and stage magician, was dead and buried, so they said—but what was that thing in the mummy-case?

THE PISTOL
By S. GORDON GURWIT

An appealing story of a love so strong that it broke through the barriers of Death.

Also a thrilling installment of Robert E. Howard's vivid novel, *The People of the Black Circle.*

Oct. WEIRD TALES Out Oct. 1

THE EYRIE

FROM time to time we are importuned by our readers to devote several pages of WEIRD TALES each month to a forum in which the lovers of fantastic fiction can exchange views. We are asked to have articles on weird fiction generally, information about our authors, debates between the fans. It has been suggested that we expand the Eyrie for this purpose, and make it a battleground for the conflicts of the weird fiction fans. This we have stedfastly refused to do, for WEIRD TALES, after all, is a magazine of fiction, and undue expansion of the Eyrie, or the opening of a new department to satisfy the fans, would take just that much space away from weird stories, which are our primary interest. So, instead of reducing our story space to make room for such a department, we suggest to those of you who are interested that you write to Charles D. Hornig, editor of *The Fantasy Fan*, whose home address is 137 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey. We have been receiving *The Fantasy Fan* for several months, and we think it is just the forum you want—that is, those of you who make weird fiction your hobby. *The Fantasy Fan* does not appear on the news stands, but Mr. Hornig can supply you with detailed information about it.

Constant Reader Airs His Thoughts

Joseph T. Ryerson, of Muskegon Heights, Michigan, writes to the Eyrie: "Having been a constant reader of WT ever since its conception, I feel it's about time I aired my thoughts. I just read in the July issue the reprint from your first issue, *The Dead Man's Tale*, and feel that your present authors will have to keep on their toes in order to maintain the standard of that story. But for sheer pathos and beauty, *One Christmas Eve* stands out above the rest. It was a very fortunate circumstance that Robert E. Howard did not have a hand in writing *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*, for it is a humdinger as it is. . . . No biographies of authors, please."

A New High Mark

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "Congratulations on your July issue. It was a knockout and then some. I don't believe you have ever put out an issue containing so many stories of superb quality and high standard. You have certainly set a new high mark. *Through the Gates of the Silver Key* was a classic, and positively the best piece of work those incomparable artists Lovecraft and Price have ever done. Its cosmic scope and imaginative brilliance certainly give one plenty of food for thought. By all means give us a sequel to this story, and get Randolph Carter or one of his 'facets' back to earth again. Arlton Eadie takes second honors with his new mystery serial, *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*. This is the best serial since *Golden Blood* and the best work I have ever seen by Eadie. If he can sustain the present high mark of eery mystery and nameless horror throughout the forthcoming chapters, he will have written a masterpiece. *The Master of Souls* by Harold Ward was also a very entertaining and unusual story, having a most bizarre and original theme. Ward's work has been steadily improving, and I am surprized he does not receive more comment."

Don't Enlarge the Eyrie

Edgar Hurd, of Crescent City, California, writes: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for about four years and I think it has im-

(Please turn to page 396)

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established in early 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Jan.	Jan.	----	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
----	----	----	Feb.-Mar.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.	----		----	Mar.	Mar.
Apr.	----	----	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
----	May	----		----	May	May
----	June	----	Jun.-Jul.	June	June	June
July	----	July		July	July	July
Aug.	----	----	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.
----	----	----	----	Sept.	Sept.	----
Oct.	----	----	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	----
Nov.	----	----	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	----
Dec.	----	Dec.	----	Dec.	Dec.	----

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

840 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Illinois

(Continued from page 394)

proved constantly and is the best magazine of any type on the market. I like Brundage's covers, though I think some weird monsters in addition to the human figures would be good. Please *don't* enlarge the Eyrie until it crowds out a couple of short stories. The plan of making extracts of the important parts of the letters is best. And I hope the majority of the readers vote against an author's page. In the July issue, *Through the Gates of the Silver Key* was my first choice. It was marvelous. It filled my head with mighty thoughts and great yearnings. I give *The Illusion of Flame* by Paul Ernst second place. . . . Your newest author, C. L. Moore, is excellent. I am eagerly waiting for his story, *Dust of Gods*. My favorite story characters are Conan and Northwest Smith. The bloody adventures of Conan are very interesting, and C. L. Moore has such unusual and original conceptions that reading his stories is a pleasure. I am fed up with stories of animated corpses and vampires. . . . I like the fantastic and imaginative story better than the scary one. Especially do I like stories about undeveloped and unknown powers of the mind."

About Our Authors

Robert Bloch, of Milwaukee, writes: "In heaven's name, publish that author's page! WT has a very interesting staff of authors, indeed. No one could claim a more interesting career than Price, soldier of fortune, etc.; Howard, a typical barbarian like his own Conan; Lovecraft, the recluse; Derleth, the descendant of a count who fled the French revolution; Quinn and his interesting job. Yet the bulk of your readers know nothing of these fascinating facts. Loosen up with them!"

Arlton Eadie's Stories

Emil Petaja, of Milltown, Montana, writes: "Although I have just had time to glance over the July issue of WEIRD TALES, the stories appear to be unusually excellent. I am glad to see a novel by Arlton Eadie. It seems to me that his stories have never been fully appreciated by your readers. One of his tales, *The Avenging Shadow*, which appeared in 1931, was never mentioned in the Eyrie, but it struck me as being one of the best tales you have ever published. . . . I want to say a word regarding suggestions made of late with reference to a quarterly or mid-monthly magazine, to be devoted to longer stories, reprints, etc. I consider this a splendid idea. You could publish in it long serial reprints, both from back issues of WEIRD TALES and stories such as *The Wolf-Leader* by Dumas, which appeared serially as a reprint in WT. This could appear quarterly and be twice as large as WT, and sell for fifty cents. In this, you could give information on old, forbidden magic, true weird tales, and old writers like Cagliostro, Roger Bacon, etc. With regard to a page giving information about your authors, I agree with you, by all means don't have one. In many cases these would detract from the author's popularity. I can see no reason for kicking about your covers. Individually, each is a work of art, and the weird atmosphere is uppermost in each."

More Vampire Stories

Miss André Cross, of Hollywood, California, writes: "For three years I have been a faithful reader of WEIRD TALES and I have never found anything to make a comment about. I was never very interested in writing fan letters, but it seems I must write to you and say how much I enjoy every word of your magazine. It is simply supreme. Your cover designs are extremely attractive, and if they are not actually done by a woman, they have the fine, delicate touch of a woman. . . . I think you should have more stories of vampires and stories such as *The Return of Balkis*, *The Sapphire Goddess*, and *Revelations in Black*. Give us more of the charming fascinating character Monsieur Jules de Grandin, the gallant Frenchman, and his adventures."

By Air Mail

Fred Anger, of Berkeley, California, writes: "WEIRD TALES is certainly improving steadily. Every new copy gets better and better; evidently there is no end to your progress. The first installment of *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* is as good a piece of weird fiction as it is possible to find. Mr. Eadie has given us nothing but the best in all the years he has been writing. *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* equals if not excels *The World-Wrecker* of several years ago. Congratulations, Mr. Eadie. *Through the Gates*

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